

SUBSIDIARIES: A GUIDE TO

PENTEX™



A Sourcebook for Werewolf: The Apocalypse™

SUBSIDIARIES: A GUIDE TO

PENTEXTM

By Justin Achilli, Richard E. Dansky, Deena McKinney, Clayton Oliver and Ethan Skemp

Credits

Authors: Justin Achilli (Black Dog), Richard E. Dansky (Endron and King), Deena McKinney (Avalon), Clayton Oliver (Magadon), Ethan Skemp (Tellus)

Additional Contributions and Advice: Heather Smith and Rev. Will Van Meter (Magadon); Brian Urbanek, Owen Winkler and Jess Heinig (Tellus)

Developer: Ethan Skemp

Editor: Aileen E. Miles

Art Director: Aileen E. Miles

Interior Art: Andrew Bates, Jeff Holt, Steve Prescott, Jeff Rebner

Cover Art: Steve Prescott

Layout, Typesetting and Cover Design: Aileen E. Miles

Special Crack Addict Thanks

Mike "Vagner" Tinney, for discovering "the only roleplaying you'll ever need" — and in some cases, being right about that.

Steve "Pylor" Wieck, for captaining the Roving Band of Merry Streakers.

Brian "Halwain" Glass, for putting up with the junkie dwarf roommate.

Rich "Magnos" Thomas, for waging the war against anti-beard discrimination.

Ben "Barclay the Benevolent" Monk, for succumbing to a bad case of lemmingitis.



735 PARK NORTH BLVD.
SUITE 128
CLARKSTON, GA 30021
USA

© 2000 White Wolf Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction without the written permission of the publisher is expressly forbidden, except for the purposes of reviews, and for blank character sheets, which may be reproduced for personal use only. White Wolf, Vampire the Masquerade and World of Darkness are registered trademarks of White Wolf Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved. Werewolf the Apocalypse, Book of the Weaver, Project Twilight and Subsidiaries a Guide to Pentex are trademarks of White Wolf Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved. All characters, names, places and text herein are copyrighted by White Wolf Publishing, Inc.

The mention of or reference to any company or product in these pages is not a challenge to the trademark or copyright concerned.

This book uses the supernatural for settings, characters and themes. All mystical and supernatural elements are fiction and intended for entertainment purposes only. Reader discretion is advised.

For a free White Wolf catalog call 1-800-454-WOLF.

Policy dictates that you should check out White Wolf online at

<http://www.white-wolf.com>; alt.games.whitewolf and rec.games.frp.storyteller

PRINTED IN THE USA

SUBSIDIARIES: A GUIDE TO

PENTEX™

Contents

Introduction: Ground Floor	4
Chapter One: Endron International	8
Chapter Two: Magadon, Incorporated	34
Chapter Three: King Breweries and Distilleries	62
Chapter Four: Avalon Incorporated	82
Chapter Five: Tellus Enterprises	100
Chapter Six: Black Dog Game Factory	118



PENTEX

Introduction: Ground Floor

Greed. Lies. Backbiting. Apathy.

Welcome to the heart of the corporate world.

More accurately, welcome to **Subsidiaries: A Guide to Pentex**. This book is dedicated to the day-to-day business of the tainted megacorp, but not at the upper levels where policy is made, nor in the secret fomor-spewing laboratories that crop up in most every Garou chronicle. No, this book deals with the 98% of Pentex that the rest of the world is familiar with: the companies it controls. Pentex's subsidiaries manufacture products to bring the buying public under the megacorp's heel, provide research useful in their war against interfering werebeasts, and most importantly, generate revenue. *Lots of revenue.*

This is the covert portion of the War of the Apocalypse, and so far, Pentex has the edge. The average middle-class citizen of the World of Darkness' America pops some of Magadon's energy supplements with breakfast, fills up his tank with Endron Premium on the way to work, sits in the smoking section of O'Tolley's at lunch so he can enjoy a Circinus menthol with his Gutbuster, stops off at Herrick's for groceries and enjoys a King scotch after dinner. His pantry is filled with Rainbow plastics; he gets magazines published by Vesuvius delivered monthly to his door. He bribes his kids with Avalon toys and Tellus games, and ignores them if they get too deeply into Black Dog RPGs. He isn't a fomor, and he isn't a Black Spiral Dancer — but like

millions and millions of others, he's a potential puppet, one waiting for Pentex to pull his strings.

That is why these subsidiaries are as dangerous as they are. They're covert, and they're nigh ubiquitous. They aren't obvious targets, and they're by and large very public presences. They cannot be stopped by simple fang and claw. They're as powerful as human greed and as sure as the human urge for convenience. There's no quick and easy solution to stopping the mess these companies make.

Your players have got their work cut out for them.

Close to Home

Probably the scariest thing about this book is that it's not as much fiction as you'd think. Many of the practices described herein are actual, real-world policies practiced (but not advertised) by real-world companies, all in the name of The Bottom Line. What's more, it's not always obvious which are fiction and which aren't. A real-world major oil company really does have a group of "Them" who quietly make policy decisions. There really are distilleries who provide super-cheap vodka to various labels. White Wolf Game Studio does indeed have a clean refrigerator. By no means do we mean to imply that the major corporations of our own world are conspiring on a secret agenda of behavior alteration and economic tyranny — but actual corporate policies lie somewhere between a company's

corporate “spin” and the Bane-ridden, Wyrms-worshipping excesses herein. If you aren’t sure whether a given policy is based on a real-world counterpart or not, ask around. You’d be startled by the things you can learn.

Naturally, you have to have players who can be trusted not to abuse what they know out of character, or players who don’t read many Storyteller-oriented sourcebooks, or else they’ll be all over these companies. Even overly suspicious players who don’t know the truth might get leery when presented with a software giant or oil magnate they’d never heard of before. To get around this, you can introduce these subsidiaries by having an elder or another contact approach the pack with grave concerns about the corporation in question, then describing how pervasive the company’s products are when the pack “reflects” on what they’d already know. Alternately, you can use foreshadowing — throw in a few Tellus games in harmless locations during the stories leading up to your Tellus story, or use an Endron gas station in a scene where the conflict has nothing to do with Endron.

(In fact, this is good policy for any **Werewolf** game; as influential as these companies are in the World of Darkness, they should logically show up in the background even when they’ve got nothing to do with the story at hand. Paranoid players will twitch a lot, sure that every kid with an Avalon stuffed animal is some sort of spy; the others will gradually learn that Pentex’s holdings are *immense*, and not a problem that can be solved with a quick fix. Finally, they’ll accept the trappings as part of your game’s atmosphere, adding to the overall feel of your chronicle.)

If you don’t think that either of these methods will deter your players from abusing what they know, you can always just substitute a real-world company or three for these subsidiaries in your game, doing an end-run around your players that way. Nintendo probably won’t sue you for defamation of character if you portray them as a Wyrms-ridden electronic cult in the privacy of your own home. Just be careful what you post to the Internet....

Using This Book

Subsidiaries has a naturally straightforward layout; one subsidiary per chapter. However, the actual tone of the chapters varies from one to the next. Although all these companies are showcases of corruption and avarice, each one evokes a slightly different response. Pick your poison.

Chapter One covers **Endron**, the oil magnate that’s Pentex’s pride and joy. Endron is a sinkhole of greed, more suitable to a story involving avarice than any other company would be.

Chapter Two details **Magadon**, the pharmaceutical titan. The horror here is more pronounced — corruption at the very heart of the medical profession, taint in the medicines that people trust to ease pain and save lives. A Magadon story has the potential to be more disturbing than one based on any other subsidiary, due to the intimate nature of Magadon’s violations.

Chapter Three, **King Breweries**, is a fairly straightforward exploration of debauchery and deterioration. Again, it has the potential to hit closer to home with some players; alcohol abuse is a real enough problem. King’s themes touch on self-destruction, of the sort that can drag others down along with the guilty party.

Conversely, the theme of **Chapter Four** is innocence corrupted. **Avalon Toys** goes for the human race at its most vulnerable — during childhood. Subtlety is stressed over psychosis here — as if the thought of children becoming numbed, apathetic, desensitized creatures before they even reach adolescence isn’t frightening enough.

Chapter Five details **Tellus**, the video game publisher that exerts its influence over thousands upon thousands of teenagers (and chronological adults who’ve yet to outgrow emotional adolescence). Wild energy, obsessive escapism, technoshock and desensitization are the key elements here.

Finally, **Chapter Six** covers **Black Dog Game Factory**, the creators of some rather popular (and decidedly nasty) roleplaying games in the World of Darkness. Farcical though the chapter may be, it’s got a lot of verisimilitude in at least one respect — the roleplaying industry is no place to go seeking popular acclaim and sizable paychecks.

What’s more, feel free to photocopy or scan the various letterheads provided for your own personal use (no selling off copies, though). These are provided with the express intent of allowing the Storyteller to devise prop sheets, handouts and other faux documents as a game aid. Telling the players they find a memo stating that their Kin are meant to be brought in is one thing; handing them an actual piece of Magadon stationery and letting them see their Kin’s names there for themselves is a lot more vivid. Trust us, it’ll work wonders.

Recommended Inspiration

First and foremost, news programs and magazines are a good source for extra ideas of corporate corruption. Unfortunately, not quite enough information gets past the spin doctors (that’s why they’re paid so well) to make this a perfect source, so a little digging in a library would be more useful for the truly nasty dirt. Even so, there are a few sources that might serve exceptionally well for capturing the mood and theme of a good **Subsidiaries** plotline.

Wall Street — This movie’s a must. Its most memorable and oft-repeated tagline is “Greed is good” (spoken with all sincerity); what further recommendation do you need?

Profit — Although canceled not long out of the gate, some folks still have copies of this show on tape. It’s a good, clever look at the heart of an executive that could well hold a position of power at Pentex.

The Dilbert Principle — The cartoons are good stuff, but this book goes even further into analyzing the corporate mentality. Although as reference material, it’s not really dark enough, what’s *really* useful in this book are the

anecdotes from readers describing honest-to-goodness real things that happened at their workplaces. You probably won't get any inspiration for horrific upper-level sociopaths from this book, but if you want to stock a corp with clueless middle management and faceless drones, there's plenty of ideas here.

ToyFare — Aimed at collectors, this magazine could be used for some interesting roundabout inspiration for an Avalon story. The editors are particularly fond of posing superhero action figures and adding word balloons to make jokes aimed at the "older" segment of the population; yes, that means pedophilia Batman & Robin gags and plenty of scatological humor. Imagine these guys working in an actual toy design capacity and off you go.

Electronic Gaming Monthly, *Gamefan*, et al. — Glossy games magazines with giant ads, designed for the short-attention-span crowd: these are perfect reading material for Tellus stories. The ones that actually hurt to look at, thanks to clashing colors, chaotic layout and giant screaming type, are in fact the best research material for mood you can find. Leave a couple lying around when you run a Tellus story.

Dork Tower and *Knights of the Dinner Table* — Roleplaying humor comic books that can indeed be useful for a Black Dog romp (as well as just plain fun reading for roleplayers). Although the "goblins" in *KoDT* are probably more pathetic and frightening, *Dork Tower* focuses more on what happens when clueless gamers interact with the real world around them. Add werewolves to taste.





ENDRON

"You mean oil."

"I mean black blood of the Earth!"

— Jack and Egg Shen, *Big Trouble in Little China*

The air was thick with heavy, ugly black smoke. In the distance, a trio of wrecked oil wells still burned, pouring that same smoke into the night sky in rapid billows. Nearer, burned out wells, dotted the landscape, ugly black scars on reddish sand and soil. Two Americans, sweating profusely in their too-heavy tailored suits, stood on a bluff and watched the desolation with the eyes of the morally bankrupt.

"Pity all that crude's going to waste." The man on the left, a short, balding fellow with a pair of Zeiss binoculars, stared out over the landscape. "We're going to take a bath on this."

His companion shrugged. "We have other sources. A few of the other firms will be hit a lot harder than we will. And in the meantime, look at those clouds go. I'm impressed."

The man with the binoculars smiled. "Hideous bastards, aren't they? I bet they set every long-haired Greenpeace hippie in the world into screaming hysterics."

"Five bucks says the volume of letters we get from those assholes doubles in the next week."

"No bet. I know them."

"And I know you. What did you do with the last batch?"

The shorter man shrugged. "What do you think? I burned them."

Most of the time when Garou talk about "the rape of Gaia," they're being figurative. After all, no matter how profound the indignities heaped on the environment by the swarm of Pentex subsidiaries, it's a long way from dumping or toxic spills to the sort of brutal immediacy implied by the phrase.

With Endron, it's something else again. Endron's whole modus operandi is one of stabbing, vicious violation, of tearing

resources from the earth without concern for any collateral damage inflicted in the process. Of all of the many heads of the Pentex hydra, it is Endron that the Garou hate the most.

Of course, part and parcel with the whole problem is the sheer reach that Endron exhibits. One of the few Pentex subsidiaries to be truly global, Endron leaves its mark on the landscape from Nigeria to the Aleutians, and from the Oregon coastline to the North Sea. It tears up huge patches of the Texas badlands and causes human devastation outside of Lagos, impacts the ports of Oman and the lonely stretches of I-90. No matter where you go, Endron is there, and there's not a damned thing anyone can do about it.

From the Top

Endron is, for lack of a better term, the archetypal Pentex company. While Tellus may revel in its bad-boy image, and King ramble on in decidedly quirky fashion, Endron is planted firmly in the bedrock of corporate America. Endron executives wear blue suits, crisp white shirts and red ties. There are no casual Fridays at Endron, as every employee who's not out in the field is considered to be a representative of the corporation as a whole. Endron's corporate headquarters are a gleaming skyscraper in Houston, but the company maintains corporate offices in New York, Los Angeles, Edinburgh, Jakarta and Tulsa. Top tier management flies in one of the four company jets; middle management goes business class and counts itself lucky. Every so often Endron sponsors something on PBS or otherwise makes its presence known as a "good corpo-

rate citizen," but in general, there's nothing to distinguish Endron in the public mind from any other big corporation. Some might see this as a failure of advertising, but Endron views it as camouflage.

Diversification

Despite its roots as an oil company, Endron has its fingers in a staggering array of businesses. Petroleum and its associated industries are more than enough to make Endron profitable, but after all, excess is what Endron's all about.

At the heart of the Endron structure is the oil business. That covers exploration, pumping, transportation and refinement. All of this is handled in-house, by separate divisions or spin-off companies that are wholly owned subsidiaries. The difference between Endron International and Endron Refinery Partners, Ltd., is taxes and letterhead, nothing more. Spun off from this core business is a variety of smaller companies in assorted fields. While Endron doesn't manufacture its own drilling equipment, it does maintain an R&D house to explore new ways to find oil and better technologies for digging it out. While Endron keeps the best for its own use, Endron Technological Solutions has turned a tidy profit over the years by licensing its discoveries to manufacturers (often within the Pentex family) and the competition. After all, upper management figures it's all to the good to have as many companies scouring the planet as possible — so long as Endron gets to do it first, fastest and most profitably.

The back end of Endron's central business is post-refinement, which is to say the sale and distribution of gasoline. That entails a trucking operation, a franchised line of gas stations (though Endron self-operates over 60% of its stations), the associated lines of mini-marts located at most stations, and a small advertising firm that handles only Endron business and which is, for all intents and purposes, owned. Then one gets to the spin-off concerns — distribution of Endron merchandise, manufacturing or contracting to manufacture same, Endron's sponsorship of several racing teams — and in the blink of an eye, Endron's reach is suddenly revealed to be quite large indeed.

History

In the Pentex corporate guide, there is proud mention of Endron as being the very first Pentex company. Endron takes tremendous pride in its history as the foundation of Pentex, and tries to instill that pride in its employees. As a result, it's not uncommon to see Endron workers, at least those with a sense of corporate pride, to carry themselves with a distinctly disdainful attitude around workers from other Pentex firms. After all, *those* guys work for lesser companies. No matter how much money a King or a Tellus brings in, it's still not what the whole edifice was founded upon. It's still not Endron.

In the Beginning . . .

...there was Premium Oil. Founded, like the American oil industry as a whole, in the state of Pennsylvania, Premium rapidly metamorphosed into the corporate giant called Pentex. Along the way, however, it lost focus. With assets to snap up, competitors to crush and politicians to buy — not to mention inhuman agendas to address — the oil business began to suffer. Even worse, operations had been focused exclusively on the Pennsylvania fields, which while accessible, were also accessible to a great deal of Premium's competition, and which were thus getting tapped out at an alarming rate.

In 1916, the moment of truth arrived. Pentex' oil dealings were at a crisis level, and unless something were done, the entire operation could conceivably go under. Faced with the prospect of losing its cornerstone business, Pentex did the smart thing. Recognizing that the parent corporation could no longer do the business justice or give it the attention it needed, Pentex spun Premium's original assets off into its a new, publicly owned corporation. The public offering of stock in Endron gave the struggling firm the shot of capital it needed, and the danger passed. (Needless to say, Pentex maintained a majority interest in the firm. As the years have passed and additional capital crises have forced additional stock sales, Pentex' share in Endron has dropped below a majority, but it still owns the largest single voting bloc. Furthermore, with Endron stock performing well, the Board has quietly begun a buyback.) The next year, new alliances (corporate and otherwise) that Pentex made finally allowed Endron to expand its operations, and the company was well on its way to re-establishing itself as a major player in the petroleum field.

The Guiding Light

Endron's first president, Hiram Bollingsworth, was a man of large appetites. Barely five and a half feet tall, he weighed nearly 300 pounds and had a thick spade beard that led one observer to call him "Lincoln, stepped on by a giant." Bollingsworth also had a wife, a devout Spiritualist named Hattie, who insisted on dragging her husband along to all sorts of seances, table rappings and the like. Inevitably, she hauled Hiram, who was a stolid, able executive, to one seance too many. A rather nasty Bane answered the call and took an almost obsessive interest in Hiram's doings. Slowly he — and his company — fell under its sway. When Hattie began to express concerns about the direction Hiram was moving in, he introduced her to some of what she'd been looking for over those many years.

The funeral, needless to say, was lavish, and witnesses remarked that Hiram was bearing up remarkably well.

It was under Bollingsworth's leadership, then, unencumbered by mortal distractions, that Endron really took off. Indeed, Bollingsworth was so successful that he made several Board members, including Zettler, nervous. They arranged for a fatal accident in 1959, and then rammed

through multiple re-organizations that made sure that Endron could never have a strong president again. It was also around this time that They made their first appearance, though whether this was a coincidence, a sideways maneuver by the Bane that had sponsored Bollingsworth or a move by a member of the Board is unknown. Since then, Endron has run steadily, if not explosively. It has always been profitable, and has been considered a solid investment for years. Nothing anyone currently in power is liable to do will change that, either. Once again, Endron is the rock Pentex is built upon, and this time it's been built to last.

The Late Hiram

The portrait of Hiram at Endron headquarters is not the only evidence of the man still lurking at the company. While Zettler did quite a number on Bollingsworth in sending the poor gentleman to the next plane of existence, he wasn't quite thorough enough. Unsurprisingly, Hiram's ghost lingered long after he did, and eventually learned the secret of sliding back into the Skinlands. In short, Hiram became Risen, and after a sufficient amount of time wherein he learned the rules of his new existence, he set off to finish what he left unresolved in life. His driving goal, still, is to see to Endron's success, which he does in a variety of (bloody and emphatic) ways.

Hiram's other goal, of course, is to express his displeasure with those who terminated his existence, and especially Zettler. He's begun stalking the vampire, slowly but with increasing surety. Zettler knows something's after him, but isn't sure what, and is starting to get very nervous around Endron employees....

Diversification

Diversification has come relatively late to Endron, though the company has embraced it with a vengeance. The large-scale refining operation didn't open until the 1930s, and the gasoline stations until almost ten years later. Endron's corporate strategy has always been a conservative one: See if an industry has legs, let others make the first mistakes, then jump in with both feet and a massive amount of capital. As a result of this policy, Endron's history of growth is one of fits and starts, with brief periods of rapid expansion flanked by long years of stability and slow growth.

Policy

Endron corporate policy is very simple: Make as much money as possible as quickly as possible, with as little overhead as possible. This hell-bent-for-leather profitability grab makes the stockholders happy and ties in neatly with the Wyrms' ambitions. After all, in the petroleum industry, "as little overhead as possible" means as few environmental safeguards and considerations as possible. It means as little

Our Motto

Printed in neat block lettering on white paper, the following motto is found in nearly every high-level Endron executive's workspace:

"The cost of the fine is always less than the cost of compliance."

maintenance on the tanker fleet and as few smokestack scrubbers as they can get away with, as little environmental repair to areas that have been torn up for drilling and as much sidestepping of environmental regulations as is humanly possible.

Of course, Endron can't openly flout this policy of environmental disdain. After all, it's bad publicity. Instead, the company funds think tanks and lobbyists, along with publicity campaigns designed to make the American public think that it really is no big deal if the spotted owl (or the bald eagle, or the lower two-thirds of the Snake River) gets it in the figurative neck. Coming out and saying "We don't give a damn about the environment" has proven to be ineffective, so instead Endron mounts the campaigns that say "Sure, we can save a little more wilderness — but at the cost of how many jobs? Or we can make sure that we absolutely won't have any oil slicks, but think about how much that will add to the cost of a gallon of gasoline." Slowly they turn public opinion, and inch by inch they roll back the limits of what's acceptable in terms of corporate responsibility. At the same time, Endron makes high-profile but low-content gestures in the direction of responsibility, all to add to the smokescreen.

In the end, though, it all comes down to the almighty dollar. How many can Endron pull in this quarter, how low can overhead be kept and what's up for next quarter? All the rest is commentary, though it behooves the Garou who have an interest in Endron to go and learn it.

Who Makes It?

Outside of Endron headquarters, literally no one knows who makes Endron policy. This is not a canard, but rather the frightening state of affairs. All important decisions need to be passed up the chain to corporate HQ to be decided on by the movers and shakers of the company. Who are those individuals? No one outside the inner circle knows. Rather, employees half-jokingly refer to the unseen decision-makers as "Them." All responsibility and power ultimately rests with "Them," whoever they might be — the average Endron employee honestly has no idea. Mind you, the names and faces of corporate officials appear in annual reports and the like, but everyone from middle management on down knows that those men and (rare) women aren't the real powers that be. "They" keep themselves well hidden from even their own.

Them

The men and women who actually run Endron are well hidden. They have titles like "Senior Advisor on Energy Exploration" and "Assistant Financial Officer." They have offices in Endron HQ, but not corner offices. They make a fair bit of money, but not an ostentatious amount—at least, not in any way that can be traced or taxed. They are scattered throughout the corporate structure with seemingly no rhyme and no reason, though there is not a department or operation to which they don't have some connection. Most have plaques on their office walls thanking them for 10 or 15 or 25 years of good service to Endron, and their workspaces are generally so banal as to arouse no comment, no suspicion and no interest.

That's exactly how They want it. Hidden in plain sight, they are effectively invisible. After all, they seem to have no power, no ambition and no say. It is only the very keenest observer who will note that the head of R&D seems to stop by that one accountant's office more than would seem necessary, or that certain upper-mid-level executives always seem to have lunch just before a major policy shift is made. If an observer of this sort keeps his head down and his eyes open, sooner or later he may be approached to become one of Them. If he talks, or tries to raise suspicions, or even lets on that he knows, he vanishes.

That's the way They work.

Presidency and the Board

In theory, Endron is run by its president, Max Carson, with the able assistance of his COO, Nicholas Morgan, and his CFO, Justin Chen. The three climbed their way up from the ranks together, starting as junior executives in the petroleum exploration and drilling division, and clawing their way up. The three exert an iron control over Endron headquarters and the organizational framework of the corporation as a whole. What they don't realize is that this is all they control.

The other element of "official" authority at Endron is the Board. In practice, the Board has the ability to remove the President and his chief advisors at will. In practice, this is all they have the authority to do because they, like the President himself, have been defanged. Of course, They make sure that both President and Board feel properly empowered, and that serves to hide Their existence.

Your Friendly Endron Man

Most Endron employees, be they "petroleum transfer engineers" or district managers or field geologists, have no idea and no concern for the ultimate direction of their employer. They do their jobs and get steady paychecks, and that's what matters. Over half can probably name Carson, simply because all of the memos have his name on them, but few could identify him in person, or pick Chen or Morgan out of a police lineup. Remember, Endron is absolutely huge, employing hundreds of thousands of people in one capacity or

Who Knows?

There is only one member of Carson's inner circle who knows about Them. It's not Carson, or Chen or Morgan, nor is it one of their advisors or protégés. It's Allison Kerrey, Carson's executive secretary. Kerrey's official title is "Executive Assistant to the President," and she's outlasted four of them so far. She's a very young-looking 50 (a very young looking 50, suspicious coworkers say) who sees and remembers everything. Kerrey makes more than any of the division heads (which they do not know) and is worth every penny (as Carson does know), and has more or less doped out precisely who They are and what They are up to. She has told no one her suspicions, but has written them down in a letter that will be released to two major newspapers and an environmental group in the event of her death.

As to Their reaction to the fact that Kerrey has unearthed Them, well, it remains a mystery. In fact, They have not made any reaction at all. Of course, They know that she's uncovered Them; several of Them even send her Christmas cards every year to remind her of the fact. But watch is all they ever do, and so a curious détente has been reached. Kerrey avoids mentioning Them to her assorted bosses and their associates, and says nothing when each is sacrificed in turn. For Their part, They make sure Kerrey's position is secure, her salary is commensurate with her desires and suchlike. As things stand, it is a perfect working agreement. What remains to be seen is whether Kerrey continues to hold up her end of the bargain, as she has grown demonstrably fond of "the boys," as she calls the current triumvirate. In the meanwhile, They watch her with mounting concern and interest.

another worldwide. Very few are in on Endron's larger goals; most wouldn't know what to think if the master plan were laid out in front of them. But then again, the individual cells of the body don't need to know what the mind truly wants; they just need to perform their individual tasks.

In the meantime, the average Endron employee is polite, well-groomed and friendly to the public. He wears a sharp, clean uniform and receives better than industry average compensation. He does his job well and efficiently, or else he is fired. After all, Endron maintains one of the most extensive QA departments in the petroleum industry, at least so far as the parts of the company that the public sees are concerned. After all, if the public gets good service at an Endron station, they'll come back, buy more gas and accelerate the company's ultimate agenda. That, in every sense, is the bottom line.

Influence

The pile of mail was impressive by its sheer height, though Tess dreaded it for precisely that reason. As Congressman Ducey's junior aide and designated mail reader, she would have

to go through each and every one of those letters. Most would be mercifully brief, and could be dealt with via form letter. But the crackpots...God, Ducey had some long-winded fruitbats in his district. She shook her head.

Sitting on top of the pile was a formal looking printed envelope. The return address and seal indicated that it was from Citizen Alliance for Reduced Strictures. She'd heard about this group from a few of her peers in other offices on the Hill. They were a new pro-business lobbying group, and they smelled like they had pull. "Senator?" Tess called into the next room. "I think we might have a problem."

There are three ways in which Endron exercises its pull in Washington. The first, and most obvious, is the standard method. Endron's cash flow is enormous, and a sizable amount of that money goes to supporting friendly candidates. The investment of millions in successful political campaigns comes back as tens of millions when helpful or defanged legislation gets passed. In truth, that aspect of the operation is so much a given that it practically runs on rails. In recent years there has been some small effort given to grooming potential candidates rather than continuing the hit-or-miss process of selecting from available possibilities, but that program is still in its infancy. Research data shows that the public still isn't quite ready for candidates who have too obvious corporate sponsorship.

The second route by which Endron works its will is less direct and more insidious. Through a variety of front organizations with names like "The Partnership for Energy-Rich America" and "Citizen Alliance for Reduced Strictures," Endron creates numerous groups which weigh in with press conferences, statements and such which make it appear as if hordes of outraged citizenry stand behind policy goals that coincide with Endron's. Of course, Endron spends as little as possible on these front groups, meaning that "The Partnership for Energy-Rich America" has a staff of six and no membership beyond that, but their letterhead is impressive and their name sounds important, and that's enough to attract attention from the press and nervous junior staffers. When enough official-sounding press releases and studies from potent-sounding think tanks wind up in a senator's mail pile, he starts to think about potential public backlash.

Finally, as noted previously, Endron spends its money working on the opinion and viewpoint of the electorate. Even the staunchest green-friendly advocate in Washington can be replaced if his constituents are convinced that he's costing them jobs or money. As such, liberal congressmen and senators keep a careful eye on whom Endron is targeting next, and can sometimes be found backpedaling from strongly held positions to avoid being too obvious a target. After all, it's the highest nail that inevitably gets hammered down first.

Endron International

"So you are saying, Mr. Henderson, that if I agree to allow your employer," Tomas Nnah said the word with some distaste,

"to set up an operation in the region we discussed, Endron will in turn build six hospitals and an equal number of schools and provide medicines and vaccinations for over two million children living in poverty." Nnah flipped through the pages of the Endron proposal once again, shaking his head in displeasure. "And all of that is just for a two year lease on the site, yes? It's most generous." He slammed the clipboard with the proposal down on the polished wood of his desk. "What's the catch?"

"Why, Mister Nnah, there is no catch." Delbert Henderson was all overstuffed affability and oozy charm. "I know this is hard to believe, but we actually do occasionally have something of a corporate conscience at Endron, and it bothered some of our senior managers to think about all of the poverty and disease and suffering that would be within, well, spitting distance of this site. So rather than just make this a business deal, we thought we'd add a humanitarian angle as well. Try to do some good." He spread his fleshy hands in a gesture intended to convey goodwill, but which only made him look like he was sizing Nnah up to tackle him.

Nnah laughed bitterly. "It makes a nice little publicity opportunity for your employers, you mean. No doubt they need one after that spill off the coast of Oman — the third one this year, is it not?"

Henderson carefully maintained a neutral tone. "Perhaps." The façade of friendliness was still there, but fading. "And perhaps you should consider this: If you refuse this offer, we will make certain that every man, woman and child in this fleabag of a country knows that you and you alone were responsible for turning down a deal that would have brought hospitals, schools, medical assistance and jobs to this chunk of desert that you're so fond of. How long you think they'll allow you to stay in office after that gets out, Mr. Nnah? How long until someone willing to deal with us tries a coup? It's a long run to Liberia and sanctuary, you know."

Suddenly, the mask of friendliness reappeared. "But honestly, none of us wants that to happen. At least, I don't. And just to show you what a sport I am, I'll make sure we chip in an extra million to repair the local infrastructure. Can't have any of our trucks throwing an axle, can we? Of course not."

Energy is a global business. Deposits of oil and natural gas that were laid down in the Permian don't care about national boundaries or easy accessibility. They are where they are, and it's Endron's job to go get them. That means convincing hostile governments to allow drilling operations, setting up offshore rigs and otherwise not allowing any obstacle, manmade or otherwise, to stand in the way of the quest for more fuel to feed the world's insatiable hunger for energy.

So what exactly does that mean for Endron? It means bribing Third World country government officials to allow Endron to set up essentially independent fiefdoms within their borders, complete with private armies. It means building monstrous deep-sea drilling rigs that pour thousands of gallons of sludge into seawater a day. It means building a gargantuan international system for transporting as much crude oil as possible at the lowest price imaginable, and to hell with anything other than minimal maintenance on that system. Endron has spun a vast and delicate web of corruption, each strand based on a simple bit of greed here

or a cut corner there. Taken by themselves, each compromise Endron has imposed is nothing, an understandable slip. But when there are thousands upon thousands of those compromises, each feeding on the other, then the cumulative effect is staggering. A hired gun in Lagos who shoots squatters on Endron land and an EPA agent in northern California who cuts a deal with the company on a cleanup of an oil slick both empower the monstrosity that is Endron.

Tactics

Endron doesn't just have one trick for getting what it wants. It has a whole sack full, with dozens of others in reserve. When Endron identifies a target, whether it be a likely spot for drilling in Nigeria, a good range for wildcatting in Texas or an offshore site in disputed or territorial waters, the company goes after it with the single-minded dedication of a starving predator. What Endron sees, it wants. What it wants, it takes. And whatever stands in the way of what Endron has decided to take either gets subsumed or destroyed.

The Carrot

While Endron is certainly capable of using absolutely brutal tactics to get what it wants, it prefers to start with a softer approach. A surprising amount can be accomplished with bribes and the like. Often turning the head of a key local official is a whole lot faster and cheaper than bringing in the bully boys.

Once Endron has identified a potentially profitable site, its corporate research team goes to work. A massive dossier of pertinent information, from the local political scene to the known weaknesses of government officials to pressing concerns of the indigenous populations to lingering tribal or religious disputes in the area that could possibly serve as leverage. Of course, Endron prefers to spend as little money as possible. If the research team uncovers that the Secretary of the Interior of a country that has an oil deposit ripe for exploitation has a fondness for prostitutes imported from the brothels of Bangkok, then Endron will see to it that his tastes are indulged in exchange for the rights to exploit that territory. It sounds expensive, but compared to the cost of an armed insurrection, the price of feeding one man's (or, if necessary, a few men's) vices is drowned in the profits from a single well.

Unfortunately for the bottom line, the "carrot" method of working into a territory is rarely that simple. Usually Endron has to barter, trading hospital construction, training, guaranteed jobs and the like in exchange for rights to real estate. Politicians who arrange such "bargains" are roundly viewed as heroes for extorting economic aid out of the greedy American corporation, but the truth of such matters is a little more complicated. For one thing, every "concession" of this sort Endron makes is another photo opportunity, another volley fired in the war to make them seem palatable to the American public. For another, those

concessions — whether they be money, hospitals or the like — come with a very high price. Once Endron's in, it stays as long as it wants to, and the territory it's on becomes essentially an independent enclave under Endron control. Local police and the like find themselves outnumbered and outgunned by Endron security forces; should the government decide it's time for Endron to leave, they're not likely to get too far unless Endron wants to go. Furthermore, the gestures Endron makes essentially bind the local government to Endron's agenda, as the company's lawyers are very skilled at drawing up agreements that not only bind, but strangle. A document that seems to indicate that local military forces will assist in keeping the peace on an Endron site can be revealed to mean that the national military needs to sweep the area clear of squatters — by shooting them if necessary. Unfortunately, it's rarely necessary for Endron to lean hard on their bought men in these situations; many are eager to improve their own situations and are more than willing to turn the troops loose on inconvenient civilians.

If all else fails, and the potential strike is worth it, Endron simply floods the problem with cash. Few hard currency-poor economies can stand to resist an influx of American dollars, and the promise of more once the site's in operation. This sort of thing is only done in extremis, however because Endron *hates* throwing money at problems. It's always so much cheaper — and more satisfying — to use another approach.

The Stick

For every government that rolls over for Endron cash, however, there's another that wants no part of Yanqui imperialism, bourgeois exploitation or the sort of headache that dealing with Endron is known to produce. There are times when the research team's work yields an initial blank, when the local officials can't be bribed or diverted and when every attempt at a peaceable infestation fails.

That's when Endron gets nasty. The first step is blackmail. The minister whose virtue was resistant to bribes may sing a different tune when his taste for little boys is about to become public knowledge. The army captain whose troops are ready to drive the Endron construction team out might back down if threatened with exposure as the man who perpetrated a notorious massacre. Such approaches can be swift and effective, but they tend to produce smoldering resentment, and generally necessitate the removal of the target of the blackmail sooner or later. Fortunately, doing so is rarely difficult.

If blackmail doesn't work, there are always other options. Threats, extortion and even murder are cheap and easy. Well-guarded and tough opposition may require even more extreme measures. It is most assuredly not past Endron to arm and finance insurrections, fan the flames of long-simmering ethnic or tribal feuds or otherwise generate armed conflict and mass murder of the sake of getting at a patch of land that might have oil underneath it.

On Site

Endron is much like Kipling's archetypal Dane. Once he's in place, he never leaves. Once Endron moves into an oil field, it's there to stay, at least until the oil runs out. A standard field compound is surrounded by a chain link fence topped with concertina wire, and if the situation warrants it, the fence is electrified. Most have their own airstrips, or at least their own helicopter landing pads, and limited road access. The basic compound design has two gates, each manned by heavily armed guards and backed up with watch-towers. Motion sensors and other high-tech security devices blanket sensitive areas, and patrols of armed guards make regular sweeps. Patrol patterns change on an average of once a week, to avoid the threat of infiltration.

The standard Endron blueprint remains the same, whether the well is being set up in Canada, Mexico or the Gobi. There are rows of barracks for the workers, generally locals because they're less expensive. Shift foremen and skilled laborers are all brought in from the outside, however, and they live in a separate barracks with more amenities and larger personal quarters. Scientists, management staff and other white-collar personnel have still different quarters next to the central command building, which houses laboratories, temporary offices and the executive kitchen. All of the buildings are kept a safe distance from the actual oil wells, which operate as close to around the clock as possible. The main road of the encampment, however, does wind past the oil wells and the pumping stations nearby, in case the crude needs to be transported by trucks. Sometimes Endron puts in pipeline to the nearest coast, sometimes it relies on trucks, but always the oil flows.

Endron trucks tend to move in convoys, with armed guards in vehicles fore and aft, and the occasional Uzi-toting peace officer riding shotgun in one of the trucks as well. Endron convoys have been hijacked before, both by Garou and by agrarian reformers intent on liberating the corporation's ill-gotten crude, and as such the company takes no chances with the safety of its product. In fact, Garou assaults on Endron trucks have slackened sharply of late, primarily because word has gone out that there's not an awful lot one can do with a hijacked truck full of crude oil; attempts to put the oil back where it came from are of course doomed to failure, so the Garou just end up with rather hard to conceal tanker trucks full of stolen property. Attacks from revolutionaries and other antisocial types are more of a threat, and Endron guards have orders to shoot to kill should a situation arise.

Outsiders are never, ever welcome on Endron property. Assuming intruders aren't shot or otherwise dealt with, they're escorted off the property immediately. Non-Endron employees on official visits get a distinct sense of not being wanted and are relieved when they finally get off site. Guards escort visitors everywhere, security checkpoints are omnipresent and the whole ambiance is that of a Cold War-era site inspection in the Urals. Everything is done to ensure that Endron enclaves are by Endron, for Endron and of Endron. Period.



Violence Rocks Oil-Producing Region

LAGOS, NIGERIA — At 12:00 today, new fighting broke out in the disputed Ogoni region of Nigeria, home to some of the richest oil fields in Africa. Government sources, including a press secretary for President Abacha, stated that the fighting was between members of the Ogoni, one of largest ethnic minorities making up Nigeria, and their neighbors, the Andoni. Violence between the two groups has been sporadic for over six years, and has resulted in hundreds of deaths during that time. Government estimates are that nine people have been killed or wounded in the fighting, including an American, Dominic Vyte, a supervisor with the Endron oil company. Endron maintains a drilling and pumping station near the disputed region.

Ogoni spokesman Solomon Komo, speaking on behalf of David Saro-Wiwa, the leader of the Ogoni movement, claimed that the government's reports were "damnable fictions." Instead, he claimed that the Ogoni and Andoni have no conflict, and produced eyewitnesses who claimed that the fighting had been instigated by regular government soldiers. "They did not even speak Andoni," said one witness. Komo also accused the Nigerian government of "toadying to foreign oil interests and selling out its own people."

In the wake of the renewed hostilities, Endron has issued a statement that oil production at the Ogoni facility will not be affected by the ethnic strife, and that no price increases are forthcoming.

Deep Dark Oceans

"See that? That's a squall line coming in. It's gonna hit us like a hammer. Forty, fifty foot waves, easy. You'd better get inside." Shift foreman Ramos was grinning like a lunatic. The wind was already buffeting his yellow slicker, but he didn't seem to notice. Instead, he took a positive delight in describing precisely how horrible the storm was going to be, how dangerous it would have been a few years ago and so on.

"The Menantol can stand up to this sort of thing, yes?" That was Professor Lewis, a gentle, timid sort with a fringe of gray hair and a perpetually harried demeanor. He was a marine biologist, and frankly no one was quite sure what he was doing there.

"You bet your mother's ass it can." Ramos was hugely confident. "A storm that will fold up an Exxon platform like a tinkertoy won't even spill your tea here. Now go on. Get inside before that storm hits." The rest of the guests were only too happy to obey as the ominous black clouds loomed ever closer, but before he, too, stepped into the sturdy central structure, Professor Lewis looked back.

Ramos still stood on the deck, his face to the storm and his arms outspread as if to embrace the wind. But that wasn't the truly curious thing that Professor Lewis saw. For the good professor, worried that Foreman Ramos would be swept from the deck by the storm, looked to see if the man's boots were sturdy enough.

Once glance allayed Lewis' concerns. Despite the fact that he was barefoot, Ramos was perfectly safe. After all, his claws seemed to have gotten a very good grip on the deck indeed.

Not every oil deposit Endron identifies is on land. Huge quantities of oil and natural gas are located under the ocean floor, and Endron's not going to let a little thing like that stand in its way. Hence, the development of the Menantol, Endron's

21st century design for deep sea offshore drilling rigs. Sporting a hexagonal framework, rather than the traditional four-cornered structure, a Menantol can drill a full half-mile deeper than any of its predecessors in search of oil and natural gas deposits. Built to handle the rigors of the North Sea, where Endron has put the bulk of its offshore efforts in place, the Menantols have weathered the worst that winter can throw at them and come away with flying colors.

However, a Menantol platform is a lot more than just a drill. All platforms have, in addition to the equipment necessary to drill wells and pump the oil up (and to control the operations) living quarters for the platform's crew, a helicopter landing pad, docking for two supertankers and several smaller craft, and an onboard refinery that allows tankers that dock to head straight to market from the platform. The new design also includes a few unexpected features, ranging from a small gym to a "research center" that none but authorized Endron geologists are allowed access to. Of course, several overly inquisitive crew members have noticed marine biologists, executives and other, less identifiable types entering research centers, but curiosity is not something that's encouraged on a deep sea oil rig.

Shipping

Malachi Sunchaser squatted on the stony beach and held the osprey in his hands. The round pebbles beneath his boots clicked and clacked against one another as he rose and walked to the very edge of the water. A faint, iridescent film rode on the waves, and the foam that was left behind when each surge receded was a dirty, ugly brown.

The osprey was that same color. Malachi had watched it, earlier, as it had plunged into the waves in search of a fish. He'd

The Hideous Truth

Do the Menantol platforms drill for oil? Of course they do, and exceedingly well. Menantols are sturdier, more efficient and safer than any other rigs currently built. After all, their purpose is to suck crude oil and natural gas out of the ocean floor better, faster and more efficiently than any other rig ever made. If that's all they did, in truth, it would be enough; the sort of ecological devastation that attends deep sea drilling is more than enough to make Pentex's overseers happy.

There's more, however. With Endron, there's always more. While the deep-sea surveying techniques Endron employs are amazingly efficient at locating buried oil and gas deposits, they're also good at locating a few other things. What sort of things? Things like seafloor construction that couldn't possibly have been built by human hands. Things like slumbering entities cocooned in rock that just might be profitably awakened. Things that even long-time Endron employees swear simply cannot be.

Because while you may never know *what* you'll find on the ocean floor, you also never know *who* you'll find there, either.

seen it struggle to take off again, its wings heavy with dirty water. He'd called to it, then, and it had barely been able to reach him where he stood.

Malachi rarely had any use for the ospreys; they were rude birds, and vicious. But this one was in pain, confused and frightened. He picked it up and stroked it gently, and his fingertips came away slick with oil.

Now he stood against the waterline, soiled waves curling around his toes and an oil-coated bird shivering against his chest. In the far distance, he could see a ship moving ponderously south. There had never been oil on these shores before those ships had appeared. But with each passage they made, the situation got a little worse.

Malachi suddenly wanted to know very much who owned that ship. He called on one of Raven's gifts, and shaded his eyes against the late afternoon sun. He could see the ship's name now, and instinctively he bit back a curse.

He was watching Strength of Endron, and it was leaking.

Endron has a massive fleet of supertankers that cruise the seas of the world, from the Persian Gulf to the North Sea, in order to bring energy home to the good old US of A. In theory, Endron's fleet is the envy of the crude oil industry. It's got more bottoms and more hold space than any other fleet in the business, which means that it can move more oil and natural gas from more ports than anyone else.

Beneath the rosy picture, however, is the rotten core of the situation. Endron's fleet is huge, but it is in poor

Pissing Money Away

On one level, it makes absolutely no sense whatsoever for Endron to encourage oil spills, leaks and other mishaps. After all, that's the lifeblood of the company that's soaking albatross pinfeathers. If the oil floating on the surface of the Bering Strait, it's not being refined into gasoline and pouring cash into Endron coffers.

The answer is that it's not deliberate, at least not quite. Endron's ends are served whether the oil reaches its destination or befouls miles of coastline, though continuing profitability is important. Indeed, that's the motive behind the whole scenario.

Simply put, maintaining a fleet of supertankers is hideously expensive. Every trip that routine maintenance can be put off is that much more rollover time for the cash that normally would be laid out for keeping the hulls in shape. A few extra trips, and the company's already made up the money it will cost to cleanup a spill. A few more, and it's sheer profit. So when the inevitable finally happens and the *Pride of Endron* runs aground off the Alaskan coast, the company's got the cost of cleanup *plus* the cost of repairing the vessel *plus* a fat healthy profit on top, whereas if they'd just done the maintenance to begin with, they'd actually come out behind financially. It's economics, and if a few million seabirds choke on the best Alaskan crude while the numbers are racking up, so much the better.

condition (to say the least). Shipboard conditions are unsanitary and dangerous; the Endron fleet has an appalling record for crew mishaps, accidents and disappearances. Furthermore, the ships themselves are in miserable condition. Maintenance that should be routine is haphazard and occasional at best, navigation systems are shoddy and outmoded and the crews...well, the less said about the crews, the better.

The end result of such sloppy management is sadly predictable: accidents. More accurately, Endron is responsible for the proliferation of oil slicks at a frightening rate. While not every mishap is a catastrophe on the scale of the *Star of Endron* disaster off the Washington coast in 1996, the back pages of the New York Times are filled with damning reports, if you read closely enough. There are too many stories about accidental releases of a few thousand gallons here and spills during transfer there, and before long the sheer volume of crude that's spilled is frightening.

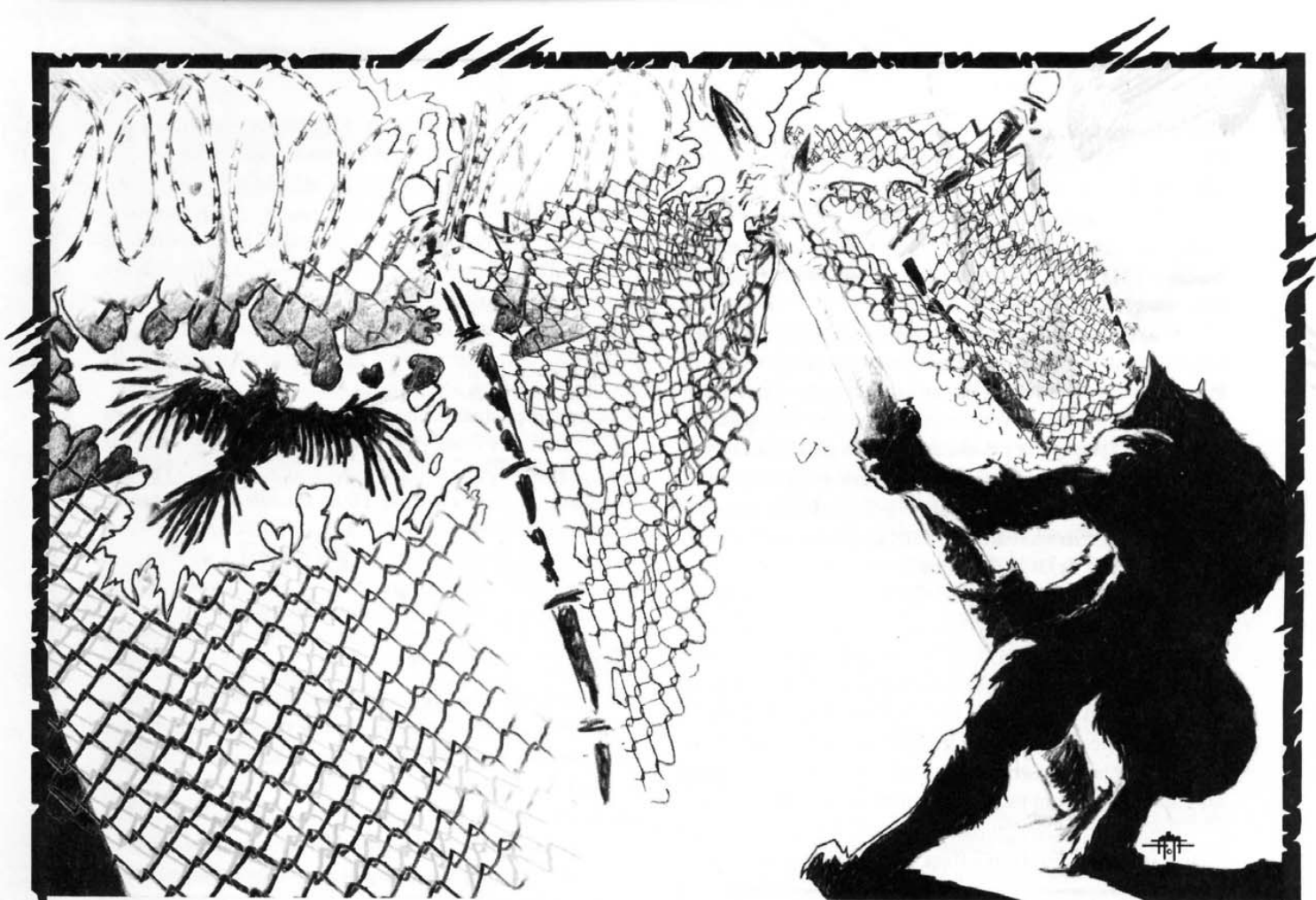
Pipelines

The fastest, cheapest way to get oil from the wells to the coast is via pipelines. Pipelines allow for a constant flow of crude, without worries about hijackings, truck breakdowns or road conditions. As a result, Endron has built several pipelines, but not without incident.

Pipeline construction is problematic. It means running roughshod over local scenery in much the same fashion as laying down railroad tracks, as well as crossing assorted borders, co-opting a great deal of real estate in a very narrow strip and requiring massive construction efforts over an extended period of time. Therefore, Endron lays pipeline only when an oil field looks like it's going to be producing for literally decades. Otherwise, it's not worth the hassle.

On the other hand, when it is worth the hassle to lay pipe across a few hundred miles, the impact can be staggering. A ten-meter wide swath of ecological horror from the heart of a continent to its coastline is nothing for the Pentecost Board to sneeze at. Plus, there are additional benefits that accrue, and not just on the bottom line.

While it would be problematic, to say the least, to have oil leaks from pipelines (for one thing, it would cut into profits; for another, the leak would quickly turn into a flood, which would attract all sorts of unwanted do-gooder attention to the pipeline's generally appalling condition), there are other ways that the pipelines can do their dirty work. For one thing, the construction crews are in the habit of leaving nasty little surprises behind when they move on — planting slow-release poisons that spread out through the soil or down into the aquifer from where the pipeline squats. Other innovations involve the fences generally put up around lengths of pipeline, which are frequently either electrified or barbed. Pheromone lures are sometimes planted inside the fence, enticing local wildlife to exterminate themselves. The stench of the rotting corpses can be picked up quite a ways away, if the lures are doing their job well. And there's



always the fact that Endron construction is as generally destructive as possible, all in the name of economy and speed. Resodding jobs are shoddy (and sometimes seeded with nasty surprises), catastrophic erosion is almost a given and it's not even worth debating the trash and detritus the crews leave behind.

But the oil must flow, after all.

Searching

At the heart of Endron's business is oil. This goes without saying. However, the corollary that most people don't think about is that the oil is what powers everything else the company does. Without a steady stream of crude, whether it be from the Persian Gulf, the North Sea or Texas, there's no Endron stations handing out free travel mugs with every fill up, no grist for the refinery mill and so on. Without the base ingredient, oil, the whole top-heavy edifice collapses on itself. In other words, Endron's continued existence hinges on two things: a constant supply of oil from its current sources, and a steady stream of new resources to tap and exploit.

Unsurprisingly, then, a great deal of Endron's attention is focused on the ever-puzzling question of where to find new pockets of oil. Teams of Endron employees scour the globe, armed with the latest in technology (and maybe just a bit more), searching for the tell-tale signs of petroleum deposits.

EEPS

Endron Exploratory Personnel Squads, or EEPS, are the first tool in the company's hand when it comes to looking for new sources of oil. Endron – and its valued employees – will go literally to the ends of the earth to find new sources of energy, and that calls for a special blend of determination, skill, endurance and sheer bloody-mindedness. In many cases, a fine disregard for sovereign nations' laws, borders and environmental regulations is also a plus, though not in all; a surprising number of EEPS members consider themselves "green" or at least outdoorsy, and honestly believe in many cases they're the best ones to keep the peripheral damage associated with their work to a minimum.

Who They Are

EEPS teams range in size from five to 30 members. They always include at least two geologists, one support staff member, one logistics officer and one security officer, though the proportions and numbers vary as the teams get larger. After all, more geologists beyond a certain point won't help when prospecting in guerrilla-infested territory in West Africa, but an extra dozen security personnel and a few extra mechanics, cooks and menial laborers might. In extreme cases, there might be as many as 15 security personnel shepherding two or three geologists, who generally com-

plain bitterly about the arrangement until such time as someone attempts to ambush the Endron convoy. At that point, the complaints tend to cease.

Endron pays very, very well, even by the exotic standards of the oil industry. That means that it can afford to hire the very best. Even those experts who might otherwise have had qualms about joining a company with a reputation like Endron's can often be swayed by sufficiently large paychecks and empty promises of improvement. Endron can also afford to poach the best and the brightest from its competitors, meaning that the EEPS teams the company assembles are as formidable collections of talent, experience and knowledge as one is liable to find anywhere in the petroleum industry. That means they're very, very good at finding oil, and whatever else they're looking for, and very professional as well. They also tend to recruit their friends as well, meaning that there's a constant talent flow into Endron that never, ever comes out again.

The support and logistics staff that goes along as part of a team handles all of the squad's day to day and mission needs. That means taking care of everything from passports and work permits to cooking, making sure the trucks are running and bribing the local bandits to ensure safe passage. Smart geologists know exactly how valuable their logistics and support personnel are, and value them accordingly. Foolish geologists pull prima donna acts and find themselves getting sick from undercooked food, having passport problems and otherwise ruining the day they opened their mouths. Logistics also tends to be the place the more "in-the-know" team members wind up, as they have the resources and the authority to take care of whatever underhanded supernatural business comes up. It's not at all unusual for a logistics officer to handle a few smuggling operations, a handful of bribes to customs officials and at least one illicit shipment per trip — and that's before she gets out into the field.

Security for an EEPS team is a mixed bag. Often it's a very boring job, consisting of hauling drunken geologists out of the local watering hole at the end of the evening. On the other hand, when the going gets tough in this business, it gets really tough. Endron exploratory teams are notorious for entering DMZs, restricted areas and the like, and the people trying to stop them can range from local bandits to guerrillas to government troops. Furthermore, out in the field, attempts to halt an expedition can be fairly emphatic. Sabotage, confiscation of gasoline and water and even gunplay are not uncommon occurrences out in the field. Every EEPS member knows the story of the team whose vehicles were shot up and whose water and food were confiscated by insurgents on a particularly touchy expedition in the Sudan. The last team member succumbed to heat and dehydration bare hours before a backup team arrived, and there were no survivors.

(What is not as well known, except in certain Endron circles, is that a great deal of painstaking effort was put into finding out who precisely (in this case, a band of poachers

Interns

Like any self-respecting corporation, Endron has an extensive internship program. While most of the internships are desk or lab jobs, a very few are in the field with EEPS teams. Normally, the interns are kept away from the more sensitive stuff — while they're on board to see if they're worth hiring down the road, there's no sense letting them see too much, after all — but every so often something goes wrong. In such cases, it's not uncommon for the poor intern to get a glimpse of something he has no right seeing, such as a Black Spiral Dancer or one of those sleeping figures beneath the earth. If the intern handles it well, he's often made an offer, right on the spot.

And if he doesn't, well, those figures beneath the earth often wake up hungry.

who thought correctly that Endron was infringing on their territory) was responsible for the deaths of the team members. Several years later, the desiccated bodies of the poachers were found by a party of "extreme tourists," who were horrified at what they'd stumbled across. A quick glance at the tableaux appeared to suggest that they had been beaten, tied down, and systematically allowed to die slowly of thirst. Furthermore, the bodies had been sprayed with some sort of compound that kept even the hungriest animals away.

The rather lost band of tourists who found the grisly scene wisely left immediately, and chose not to report it to anyone. After all, if the devil had taken care of his own once, he might very well do so again.)

In many cases, then, the security detail of an EEPS team is called on to do anything and everything up to and including shoot back to ensure the safety of his team. Of course, in many circumstances there's also a tacit agreement that the EEPS can shoot first. If, for example, a team is going out into rebel-held territory and Endron has friendly relations with the local government, one can rest assured that the government won't object to having the EEPS clear out the area around its workspace.

Equipment

While Endron may skimp on smokestack scrubbers, filters and refinement processes, they don't go cheap when it comes to equipment for EEPS. Standard EEPS equipment includes a minimum of two vehicles, including one truck with an extra gas tank capable of holding 200 gallons. Usually the ratio is 1 vehicle for every 2.5 team members. The majority are fast, rugged vehicles like Hummers or jeeps, designed for serious off-road work, while the rest are trucks specially modified to Endron's purposes. The vehicles are designed for durability and range, with the idea being that with the proper equipment Endron teams can go deeper and further into the bush than anyone else. The secondary consideration is speed. If the EEPS gets into a jam, Endron wants at least a few

survivors to report what happened. The trucks, on the other hand, are designed to carry massive amounts of cargo in even the roughest terrain, but don't move particularly quickly. In crises, they're usually abandoned.

The act of abandoning the trucks usually does bring howls of protest from the scientists, however, as they are loaded to the gills with amenities, camping equipment and most importantly, top of the line geologic and seismographic tools. Endron spares no expense in making sure its people have what they need to bring back good news.

Also tucked in with the tents, stoves and whatnot is a sizable stash of firearms, just in case, and a small but impressive cache of explosives. Theoretically, the explosives are used for mapping substrata (see below), but unsurprisingly, they can be put to other uses as well.

What They Do

EEPS' job is very simple. Teams go out to sites predetermined by R&D (though not the special labs) in conjunction with various geological survey groups, there to use every means at their disposal to search for the presence of oil. Field missions can last anywhere from six days to six months, though a quick rule of thumb is that the further the team goes from New York, the longer the stay. After all, it doesn't make any sense to hop into Mongolia for a quick look-see, especially not when the potentially richest sites are hundreds of miles in the interior of the country.

The actual details of the job are fairly straightforward. Once a target site has been reached, the members of the EEPS analyze it, take photographs, check the available evidence and then use every means at their disposal to see if there is likely any petroleum beneath their feet. EEPS do not drill, nor do they do anything but explore, at least in most cases. If the survey is successful, the team calls back to headquarters to set things rolling for a full-scale pumping operation. If not, the team packs up and moves on.

Other EEPS tasks are less glamorous but no less important. Often an EEPS is called upon to map an area and do ground level reconnaissance to prepare for future expeditions. Others get diverted to side projects like advising on road-building or drill site construction. Still others get involved in "special projects," most often for the "special laboratories." Dedicated observers might note that very few EEPS squads are selected for these special projects; a cynic would say that something untoward was going on.

Special Projects

Perhaps more than any other member of the Pentex family, Endron is riddled, top to bottom, with fomori and other unpleasant entities. At times, it is even difficult to hide the supernatural influence from the "normal" employees. This is a particular problem with tight-knit groups like EEPS, which stay out in the field together for extended periods of time. A four-month sojourn in the Gobi makes it very difficult for even the smoothest fomori to hide the fact that he's got a bad case of worms.

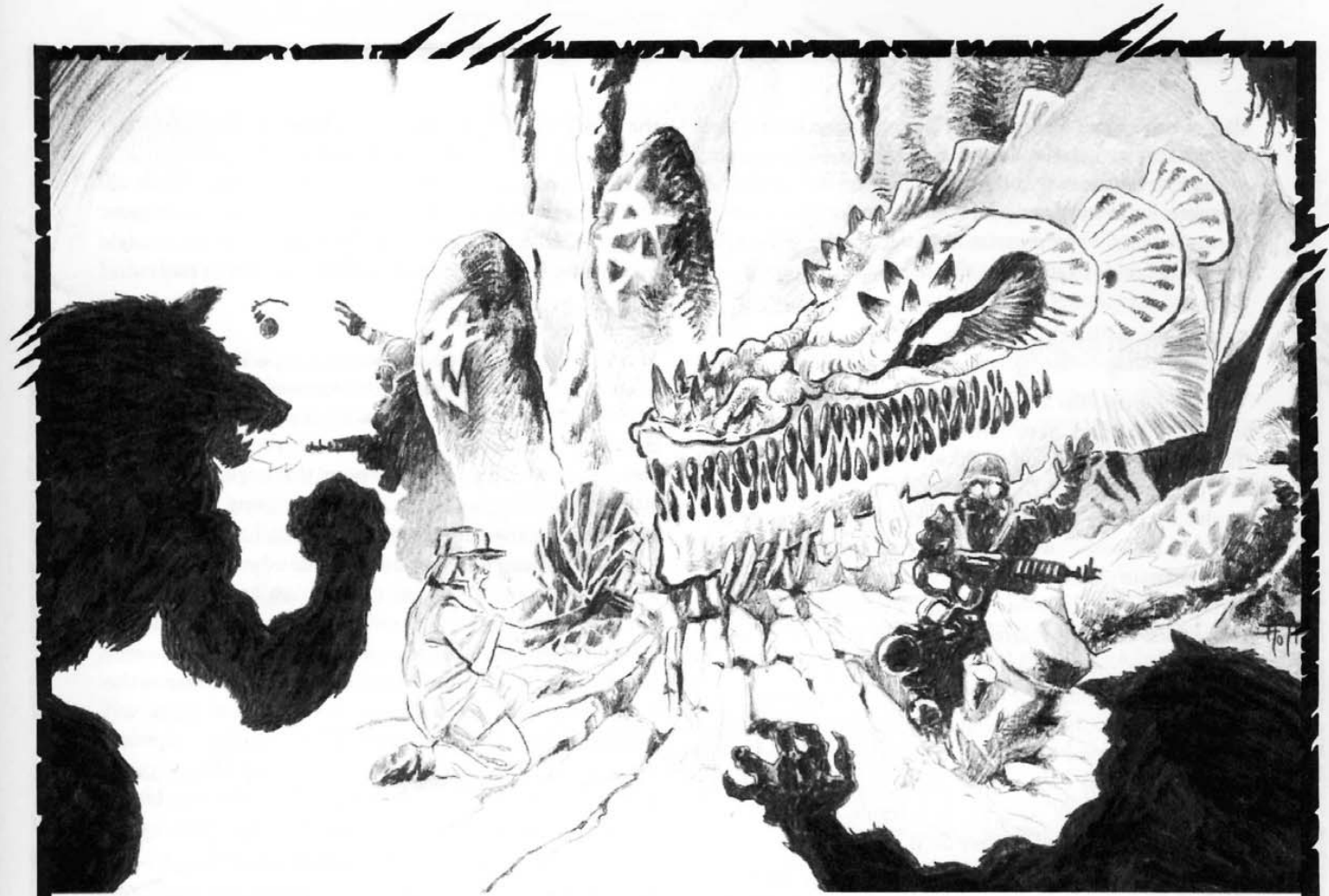
The Conodont Connection

One of the least likely suspects but best tools for helping Endron prospectors are tiny fossils called conodonts. Originally thought to be fossilized teeth, conodonts in truth are the wedge-shaped remains of aquatic invertebrates that have been extinct for millions of years. While all of that is endlessly fascinating, conodonts do have one very useful trait: They tend to pick up iron oxide in strata that are oil-bearing, making them bright red and highly visible. An experienced EEPS geologist takes a band of rust-red conodonts in an outcropping as an excellent sign, and while the correlation between such fossil beds and oil isn't absolute, the presence of the oddly colored fossils is one of the most reliable indicators out there.

What's even more interesting is that for whatever reason, conodont fossils are particularly susceptible to all sorts of outside influences, including Wyrms' taint and the natural energies of Caerns. High-security EEPS groups know how to read the coloration of conodont fossil beds to gauge the area's supernatural geology, often with egregious result. Black or oily purple conodonts are particularly sought after by EEPS teams in the know, as such odd coloration tends to reflect the slumbering presence of something truly unpleasant in the strata below.

Needless to say, drilling is always called for at those sites.

As a result, Endron has had to become inventive with its solutions. While most EEPS groups do have at least one member who is "in the know," most of the time that individual lays low and simply reports anything of unnatural interest directly to a supervisor in the special labs. However, there are times when the expertise of a whole team is called for, and that's when one of the handful of special EEPS teams gets called in. These groups are comprised entirely of fomori or humans who are aware of and accept the fomori presence. (Their teammates generally refer to such as "rush candidates," with an eye toward the inevitable progression.) These teams are called in on the most delicate missions and the most dangerous as well. If a well-meaning standard EEPS group stumbles across evidence of a caern nearby, if a regular team finds evidence of a tunnel system that extends for thousands of meters downward, if anything truly bizarre rears its ugly head, then the normals are pulled out and a special EEPS team is called in. Often, their mission is simply to continue mapping and analyzing; after all, they're more familiar with what they might be looking at than regular humans would be. At other times, the job requires infiltration, excavation or the occasional act of outright destruction. After all, those charges used for seismological readings can be used for other purposes as well.



The tainted EEPS groups tend to have very high turnover rates, which is hardly surprising. What is surprising is that there's a steady stream of volunteers, often of the best and the brightest from other teams, to be on these squads. Part of it may be the fact that there is a definite pay scale discrepancy between the special teams and the regular ones, but that's hardly the only factor. Instead, what seems to be the (very frightening) case is that sooner or later, even the most avid rockhound on a normal EEPS squad recognizes that he's not seeing everything, that there's something out there being kept from him, and often by his trusted teammates. Curiosity is a very potent lure indeed, and one that Endron can rely on to keep its Bane-infested EEPS teams filled.

Going Down

On very rare occasions, specially trained EEPS squads have to do a little cave exploration or other below ground work. Sometimes this involves making contact with a subterranean denizen, sometimes it just means exploration and sometimes all hell breaks loose. But if there's too tantalizing a cave system or an absolute necessity to chip away at the stone prison holding a powerful bane in place, then in goes the EEPS squad. Endron invests a great deal of time and money in each EEPS, and as such does not risk them lightly.

On the other hand, there are times when expensive gifts are the best ones.

Techniques

Searching for oil is a painstaking process. One simply can't drill a hole in the ground and trust to luck that a gusher will inevitably result. True exploratory work involves painstaking assessment of the area where drilling is likely to take place, checking the stability and composition of the area's geology and otherwise examining the locale in obsessive detail. Even if all of the signs are right, a massive pocket of oil won't do Endron any good at all if the EEPS team fails to notice that it's trapped by a slip fault.

There is a reward for all of the patient mapping and exploration, however: the chance to produce explosions. One of the best techniques for mapping subterranean strata involves setting off explosives and using the speed of the shock waves through the local rock paint a picture of what's down there. Different types of rock conduct shock waves better and faster than others, and by reading the pattern and strength at which seismographs pick up the evidence of the blast, an experienced geologist can "read" what's down there with some accuracy. This technique tends to show off major changes in density between layers — say, as between a solid and a liquid — very well indeed. It's thus an invaluable tool for locating oil.

Of course, it's not that simple. For one thing, many EEPS teams have at least one member who is in the know as to the company's real agenda, and it is these employees who generally get first crack at the evidence the explosions provide. These individuals are looking for oil, of course, but

they're also looking for a few other things: subterranean cave systems that might be used by allies or enemies, for example, or shadows on the output that might, in the right light, be mistaken for massive semi-humanoid figures curled up in uneasy slumber. There *are* monsters asleep in the belly of the earth, and Endron wants to be the one to find them, catalog them and if necessary, wake them up.

Exploratory Drilling

Figuring out that a site is a likely home for oil is just the first step. Once Endron establishes that there's a reasonable chance of there being an oil deposit, it moves swiftly to set up exploratory drilling. Because there is so much equipment involved in doing so, there are often maddening delays caused by the need to work out arrangements with the local government while sidestepping environmentalist concerns. During that time Endron must do its best to divert its competition from the desired site, which isn't always easy.

However, once the exploratory drilling process starts, it's impossible to hide. The components of a rotary rig are so huge that roads must often be laid to bring them in, and that sort of activity speaks for itself. "Exploratory" drilling is a huge and intensely expensive undertaking in and of itself, with no guarantee of success. As a result, when Endron decides to explore an area, they do it thoroughly.

The company tries to avoid so-called "wildcatting," which is the practice of randomly drilling holes and hoping they'll get lucky. Time is simply too short for that. Instead, Endron drilling teams rely heavily on the EEPS reports and are very, very careful where they drill. They do so, not to placate environmental groups outraged over the impact the drilling will have, but rather because the process itself is too costly to do otherwise. Instead, Endron opts for "developmental drilling." Once a functional well is drilled, stepout wells are put in around the first one. The former, called an infill well, is presumed to be in the main area of the reservoir, while the stepout wells are drilled to try to find the deposit's boundaries. Additionally, service wells may be drilled to carry off fluids other than petroleum or natural gas.

The actual mechanism of drilling is dangerous, hot and unexciting. As the shaft goes lower, its sides are covered by steel tubing which is sealed into place with concrete (at least in most cases). This keeps the shaft from collapsing and prevents precious oil from seeping out into permeable layers of rock along the shaft itself. On occasion, Endron has no problem with letting other fluids seep into those layers, and service wells in Endron fields are often extremely shoddy.

Well Types

Oil wells don't necessarily have to go straight up and down. Thanks to some creative work with fluid pressure and hydraulics, oil companies like Endron have learned how to drill shafts at an angle (called "diverted drilling") or even horizontal shafts. The latter are difficult to produce but create an elevated drainage rate, in part because the shaft emerges in

the middle of the "pay zone" — the heart of the oil reservoir. Horizontal shafts are also excellent for snaking the claims of other oil companies and stealing their reserves. While all planned wells must be filed with regulatory agencies in most countries, false plans are not unknown — as many an engineer whose field bordered on Endron's has discovered.

Leasing Shenanigans

Leasing rights to a particular area, especially if that area is located in a national park or otherwise on public lands, can be very valuable things to possess. On a basic level, they grant the company holding them permission to drill in a particular area, albeit with certain restrictions (like repairing the site after the drilling is finished). The company holding the leasing rights also gets the rights to the oil and natural gas found on the leased area, and sometimes other mineral rights as well. As a result, leasing rights to an area with a rich reservoir of fossil fuels below can be worth a veritable fortune.

However, there's another game that Endron plays with leasing rights. The company makes a point of picking up the rights to particularly scenic areas in national parks and wildlife reserves. Inevitably, ecological watchdog groups find out about the plan and set up opposition, and Endron is forced to retreat. The entire process would seem to be a net loss.

In truth, however, situations like this are Endron's gain. For one thing, the company is excellent at parlaying leasing rights to areas where it will never be permitted to drill into more leasing rights for areas that are potentially more profitable. In other words, the leasing agency buys back the leasing rights it granted Endron with other, better rights. To the public, this looks like a victory, as Endron has been sent packing. To Endron, it's an easy win.

Furthermore, the company gets the long-term benefit of slowly turning the appeals of groups like Greenpeace and PIRG into white noise. When the public's reaction changes from "Endron's at it again!" to "Those hippie freaks are shouting again," then Endron's won. And every time an ecological watchdog group has to bark out the same old message about Endron's activities, it takes one step closer to being ignored.

Line Lease Drainage

Even in the cutthroat world of international petroleum production, some tactics are considered despicable. Line lease drainage, the practice of digging wells on the border of a company's leased areas for the express purpose of sucking the reserves right out of neighboring territories, is one such technique. Needless to say, Endron is very good at it.

In addition to the economic benefit line lease drainage produces, it has an unexpected benefit for Endron. Victims of the technique see their precious oil reserves draining away and hurry up their own production, as they grow desperate to get what's theirs before Endron steals it. This haste leads to sloppy drilling and increased damage from the drilling procedure itself, which makes Them very happy indeed.

What Next?

If the exploratory drilling is successful, then Endron moves in full bore. If it's not, the company leaves, often making only a token effort to clean up the drilling range. Either way, the region will never be the same again.

Refineries

Jimmy had the hammer down, and with good reason. It was 3 in the morning, there was no one else on the road and the air stank to high heaven. The car's wheels hummed against the road as they reached the bridge over the Delaware, but Jimmy didn't care. He was just looking for cops and a place to pull over and pee.

Slouched in the passenger seat, Angela restlessly adjusted the jacket she'd bundled up for a pillow and turned to stare out the window into the night. Down below, the river waters sparkled as they reflected the lights on both shorelines. The land, however, wasn't quite so pretty. On either side, it was dominated by bulbous tanks, massive edifices and towers shooting gouts of multicolored flame into the night. Off in the distance the lights of Philadelphia winked invitingly, but Angela didn't notice. "Jeez, Jimmy," she said as she waved at the fires burning off the plant's dross. "Look at the colors on that crap. I mean, that one's red, and that one's blue, and I think that one's green. What the hell are they burning down there to get that sort of color?"

"I dunno, baby," Jimmy said, "and I don't wanna know."

Perhaps no other aspect of Endron's operation comes closer to revealing the corporation's naked ambition than do the refineries. Looking for all the world like recent imports from the lowest depths of Hell, these plants turn crude oil into gasoline and natural gas into clean fuel. They do so, however, in a landscape of welded metal and leaping orange flames, of open catwalks and huge, bulbous storage tanks. The architecture of these sites is disturbing, almost inhuman, and the sludge-filled waters and stunted vegetation surrounding them do little to make them appear less threatening.

The job of a refinery is simple: To take petroleum and make it useful. That means separating out the useful compounds through a variety of processes, burning the waste chemicals off and carefully preserving the useful products that result. The gasoline and natural gas are stored in huge containers, often ten stories high, that ring the refineries proper. These tanks are always a risk to detonate, as five have done so in the last decade.

To no one's surprise, refining crude oil is a messy, dirty job. A great many chemicals are extracted from the crude during the refining process, and a fair number more are created. Most of these are burned off by torches that tower literally hundreds of feet above the landscape, and which often can be seen for miles. Less publicized, however, is the tendency of these chemicals — including PCBs, acetone and trichloroethylene — to run off or otherwise spill. These spills are what produce the well-known refinery stench that warns drivers a dozen miles away of what's coming, and they also pollute the area around the refinery quite thoroughly.

Endron has, on occasion, tried mixing teratogenic chemicals in with the more normal toxic waste, but to no avail. Apparently the fluids the refineries are putting out normally are toxic enough to kill even Wyrn-tainted creatures and other monstrosities.

While the refinery operation is spread out across the globe, in the United States it centers on the banks of the Delaware River. (A second, smaller operation is located in San Diego). From the Philadelphia region, it's easy to transport the finished product to a majority of the Endron stations out there; over 50% of the United States' and Canada's respective populations live within a thousand mile radius of that stretch of river. That makes it easy to truck the gas to where it needs to be, and that makes it easier to realize a fast profit.

The Truck Fleet

One of the great ironies of the energy industry is the fact that transporting gas takes more gas than just about anything else. Like its competitors, Endron has a huge fleet of tanker trucks that exists to take crude oil from wells to refineries and from refineries to individual Endron stations. Any time, day or night, drivers are liable to look in their rearview mirrors and see the familiar green-and-yellow Endron logo barreling down on them in the form of an 18-wheeler loaded to the brim with gasoline.

Endron drivers are, contrary to popular belief, not a set of pill-popping crazed maniacs intent of covering as much ground as possible in as little time as possible, without worrying how many Cressidas they'll have to scrape off the front grill when they get there. Rather, Endron drivers are frighteningly professional and remarkably adept at getting around weigh stations, regulations and the like. They're fast, aggressive drivers who have a habit of pushing other drivers to go faster and drive more aggressively themselves. The extra gas burned and extra accidents caused by this encouragement adds up slowly, but add up it does.

Every so often, however, things get a little worse around an Endron truck. The secret labs are experimenting with, of all things, the paints used to coat the trucks, to make them particularly attractive to Banes associated with fear, anger and other negative emotions. While the experimental program itself is just starting, its goal is to draw Banes to the truck like moths to a bug-zapper, then allow them eventually to flutter free on the open road. In short, the fuel distribution system is in the process of becoming a Bane distribution system as well.

Research, Development and Destruction

Ostensibly, the job of the research and development arm of a petroleum company is to find new and better uses for crude oil and natural gas. Cleaner gasoline, new technologies for extracting oil from shale — this is the sort of thing that one would expect Endron's R&D teams, particu-



larly those in the infamous "secret labs," to be working on. In most cases, one is even right to expect that sort of thing. The bills must be paid, after all, and the company must give at least the appearance of doing something of this sort to satisfy the public. (On the other hand, no fewer than four methods for improving the refinement process immeasurably have come out of R&D in the past six years. Each discovery was commended, and then filed away, never to be seen again.) Such jejune concerns are not all that Endron's working on, however — far from it.

Instead, the company sponsors the "secret laboratories," which only a handful of employees know about. In truth, the secret labs (officially dubbed Research and Exploration Entities) are tucked into other departments and onto other projects, meaning that with the flick of a pen they can vanish as thoroughly as if they'd never been. Indeed, REE expenditures don't even appear on the official Endron budget as a distinct entity, though they swallow a disproportionate amount of the moneys assigned to R&D.

REE scientists are, to a man, dedicated, focused and utterly amoral. All have been exposed to the company's true goals and allies, and have decided to play ball. Driven by an insatiable intellectual curiosity, they take advantage of the opportunities working for the Wurm affords to try experiments that elsewhere would run afoul of ethical or at least legal concerns. At Endron, however, such initiative is encouraged.

The secret laboratories are much more than just playgrounds or torture gardens. It is in these rooms that Endron's

work in melding the aims of corporate culture with those of the Wurm goes on. Research with Banes and other foul spirits, meldings of technology and magic and other bits of foulness come out of the REE projects on a regular basis. (Cynics will be amused or appalled to note that some of Endron's most successful innovations were produced with no magical help at all, just creative uses of chemistry and petrochemical engineering expertise.) Moreover, Endron is wise enough not to keep its creative types to deadlines. Rather, corporate HQ just cuts the checks and lets the mad scientists do their worst — or best.

Among the things currently being worked on in various secret laboratories around the world are:

- Ways to use Endron products to make vehicles easier to possess by unfriendly ghosts or spirits
- Untraceable infusions of mildly psychoactive or supernaturally active chemicals in car deodorizers
- New techniques for increasing toxic atmospheric emissions from refinery sites in New Jersey and Pennsylvania
- Modifications to higher grade gasoline formulas to promote catalytic converter decay, and
- Hunter-killer microorganisms specially created to prey on the oil-eating bacteria used to clean up slicks.

Not all of these projects, or the others like them, will come to fruition. But enough of them do to make Endron's masters very happy indeed.

Energy Production

Conventional Power

Endron is one of its own best customers. In addition to digging up the resources necessary to keep power plants going, it also runs quite a few of its own. With its extremely low overhead (materials are cheap, after all, and it's not as if Endron spends a lot of money on smokestack filters and the like), these power plants are an extremely potent profit engine for the firm, as well as a way to reach out and touch the lives of tens of millions of people. Indeed, Endron is literally the lightbringer to its myriad customers, and the irony is not lost on Them.

The Plants

Surprisingly, most of Endron's power plants are actually coal-burning operations. While Endron itself got out of the coal business decades ago, it still burns anthracite in the majority of its generating stations for the simple reason that it's cheap. Coal plants also have another advantage from the Endron viewpoint: They're relatively dirty, both in terms of particulate debris and greenhouse gases. Since the more you burn, the more pollution you pump into the air, it's no wonder that Endron's fossil fuels power plant division is growing faster than almost any other aspect of the company.

Nuclear Power

These days, everyone is getting out of the nuclear power business. Everyone, that is, except Endron. With firms like Con Edison facing massive overhaul costs to keep their reactors running, they're more than happy to sell out to someone like Endron. After all, only a fool would take on

the expense of putting those plants back into tip-top shape, and with the increased scrutiny the nuclear industry is facing, nothing less than tip-top will do.

With a normal company, that logic is fine. But with Endron, things are a little different. The company certainly spends money on cosmetic improvements to the plants it buys. They certainly look impressive to casual observers and outsiders. But inside, where it counts, nothing has been done save the application of fresh paint and plaster. Deep within the heart of plants like Concord 1 and 2, on the Connecticut River, there are pitted control rods and rotted concrete. NRC officials estimated the chances of a meltdown at Concord at 24% two years ago, and through aggressive neglect they've gone up considerably since then.

In a sane world, the nuclear plants Endron operates would be shut down immediately for safety concerns. The World of Darkness is far from sane, however. Endron assures its plants continued operation by means of a very simple stratagem: It sells the power from its fission plants at a rate that

Meltdowns

A nuclear meltdown, contrary to popular belief, does not involve radioactive gunk bursting forth from the cooling towers to spatter the landscape in volcanic splendor. Rather, the term refers to a catastrophic situation that occurs when the nuclear core, or pile, of a fission reactor overheats and literally "melts down" through the floor. The core keeps going until it hits bedrock tough enough to resist its heat. Unfortunately, this generally occurs in the aquifer layer, the stratum of rock that holds groundwater.

What occurs next is nightmarish. The core sits in the aquifer, tainting the held water with radioactivity. That water gets drawn up into wells. It mingles with streams and rivers. It flows — and anywhere it flows, it carries the taint of that radioactivity with it. Depending upon the proximity of major rivers and the like, it can poison tens of thousands of square miles in a frighteningly short time.

And worst of all, once a core melts down into the aquifer, it is impossible to remove. It will sit there, pumping out radioactivity until such time as the entire pile decays. That, to no one's surprise, can be a very long time indeed.

Consider, then, what a meltdown at Concord 1 and 2 in New Hampshire would do. The plants sit astride the Connecticut River, which flows between New Hampshire and Vermont, across Massachusetts, through Hartford and down to Long Island Sound. Now consider what the consequences of that swath of New England being poisoned might be, not to mention the slow radioactive contamination of a body of water that touches on New York City and spills out into the Atlantic.

It's not a pretty picture, but it is one that's been painted many times in Endron's boardrooms. Repairs, you see, are expensive.

Oops

Considering the delicate interdependencies of modern society, it is no wonder that blackouts in major urban areas are regarded as catastrophes. While hospitals and the like can supply their own power, anything that plunges an entire city into darkness for even a little while risks plunging it into chaos and madness. When the lights go out, every storefront becomes an open invitation to loot, every windshield begs to be smashed and every pile of debris promises the heat of a bonfire. Blackouts cause untold millions of dollars in property damage, massive damage to a city's communities and scores of deaths (either from rioting or the simple failure of medical equipment, air conditioning in heat waves and the like). In short, a blackout is every mayor's worst nightmare.

Is it any surprise, then, that every so often *someone* at an Endron-owned power plant hits the "Oops" switch — a small, well-hidden deadman switch that completely cuts off any output from the plant for a period of up to six hours — smiles, and walks away to watch the fun?

Give Me Steam

The massive cylindrical towers present at any nuclear power plant are not in fact reactors. Instead, they're cooling towers, there to allow water used to reduce the temperature of the core to evaporate and reduce the temperature of the entire system. The billowing clouds of steam that so often emerge from these towers are just that: harmless, albeit very hot, steam. Lights placed on cooling towers to warn off low-flying planes often have the unfortunate effect of underlighting these clouds with green or red, leading impressionable observers to make panicked calls to the authorities about the glowing green stuff escaping from the nuclear power plant, but the truth is that what comes out of those towers is just steam. Endron wouldn't even dream of trying to use those billowing clouds to spread carcinogens or the like, if for no other reason than the fact that the public subconsciously expects that sort of thing.

That's why Endron much prefers releasing radioactive waste water into the bodies of water its plants sit on. It's less flashy, it's difficult to prove and it's very, very effective.

can only be described as "ridiculously cheap." Furthermore, the company does an excellent job of making sure that power gets sold in the areas likely to be affected in the event of a meltdown. This forces the consumers in those regions into an unpalatable choice: Force the company to clean up its plants and pay much, much more for power (Endron has never flat-out said that it would raise rates in the event of a cleanup operation, but the implication is quite clear), or trust Endron to know what it's doing and enjoy the fruits of cheap electricity. The fact that the exteriors of the plants look so well-kept has a surprisingly large impact on the consumer mindset, and makes the decision a disturbingly easy one indeed.

The Future

Endron has every intention of stepping up its role in the nuclear power industry. At a time when construction of new fission plants has nearly ground to a complete stop, Endron is applying for licensing to construct four new plants in the United States over a 12-year period. That, in addition to the seven plants Endron already owns, would make the company the largest provider of nuclear energy in the country. The fact that each of the four proposed sites is upstream from a major population center (on the Hudson, the Cuyahoga, the Swift and the Allegheny rivers) has begun to excite some attention but so far, it seems, not enough.

Alternate Energy Sources

We're not a gas company. We're not an oil company. We're an energy company.

So says one of Endron's many promotional pamphlets, designed for the perusal of customers and potential partners

alike. However, the minds behind Endron aren't stupid. They recognize that any major advances in alternate energy production, be it solar, nuclear or otherwise, would be catastrophic for Endron's bottom line. A competitor armed with a nuclear fusion technology that would make for cheap, easy and safe energy would put Endron – and most every other oil company on the block – out of business in short order. An independent, or worse yet, government invention of the same could doom the entire energy industry as it now stands. And if it were Endron itself that came up with the long-sought breakthrough, the company itself would still face massive upheaval as operations were cut or re-prioritized and once-profitable enterprises came crashing down.

With all of that to consider, it is no surprise that one of Endron's quiet money losers is a spin-off company called Easton Exploratory Energies, Ltd. EEE exists, not to fund research, but rather to seek out companies and laboratories that are doing potentially revolutionary work in energy science. Often, an EEE representative approaches the scientists involved with an offer of financial backing, in exchange for the right to observe the work for several months to see if a given project is worth investing in.

More often than not, the scientists accept. More often than not, EEE takes its few months, buys the entire operation, signs the staff to ironclad non-competes, locks down its rights to any intellectual properties generated on the project even prior to Easton involvement, and shuts the whole thing down. Notes and diagrams are carted off to EEE's headquarters to be locked away for perpetuity, while any equipment is dismantled and the entire staff laid off. Staffers who show particular promise are sometimes offered work inside EEE's parent organization, and with the non-compete clauses in place, they have little choice but to accept.

That, in a nutshell, is how Endron has clamped down on over two thirds of the firms engaged in geothermal research in the United States; how it's more or less completely dissolved the New Jersey Tokomak fusion reactor project and how it's managed to stymie at least three patents for more efficient solar cell designs in the past five years. The technology is there. Unfortunately, "there" is precisely where it's going to stay.

Endron Stations

Gasoline means nothing if the company can't get it to the consumer, and that's why Endron has a coast-to-coast chain of service stations. While Endron is only the fourth-largest gasoline retailer in the United States, at its current rate of expansion the company will be in the #2 spot by the end of the year 2000. Endron stations themselves are generally clean and well-managed. After all, why shouldn't they be? One catches more flies with honey than with vinegar and Endron has made it a corporate priority to support stations that are designed to appeal to middle America as tidy, wholesome and safe. That means clean areas around the station itself, free water and air for customers, neat and

Fun Oil Spill Facts

The common perception is that oil spills are rare, tragic events, and that the primary victims are seals, sea birds and other marine life. Unfortunately, that's not the case. Oil spillage is endemic around the world, often on a small but steady model. You might not know that:

- The oil production facilities in Nigeria average over four spills a week. Thus far the spills have totaled over 2.1 million gallons of crude.
- A favorite technique for cleaning up oil spills is simply to burn it. This produces a hard black residue which is not arable. Farmland covered in oil is simply lost.
- The black residue does, however, give off hydrocarbons and carbon monoxide, which leads to acidification of local water supplies.
- The plight of animals caught in spilled oil is tragic but well-known. However, petroleum is not kind to vegetation, either, as contact dries out any plant matter that gets coated.

sanitary restrooms and so on. Management even has spotters out to make sure that signs advertising specials at the attached markets are spelled correctly. In short, the entire chain strives to present an image that can only be described as Norman Rockwell-esque.

For whatever it's worth, the plan seems to be working; demographic studies indicate that Endron is the most popular service station among married consumers 25-49, with an especially high bulge among consumers with children under 10. When asked why he chose Endron, one father stated that if the station itself were so meticulously kept up, the product had to be good.

Unfortunately, that's not necessarily the case.

Knocks and Pings

One of Endron's most successful advertising campaigns thus far has been a fairly straightforward one. The campaign, deceptively known as "Fall 98 #2" at Endron headquarters, came with the tagline "Knocking the Knocks Right Out of Your Car," and promised that Endron's higher grades of gasoline would eliminate any knocking and pinging in your car's engine. The commercials, featuring a mild-mannered, moon-faced character actor in an Endron service attendant's uniform, were an immediate smash for one simple reason: They told the truth.

That is to say, they told the truth to an extent. Endron's Ruby and Diamond grades of gasoline really did eliminate most knocking and pinging problems from cars. Unfortunately, there were, as always, a few catches.

The first, and most obvious, was that one a consumer started filling his tank with Endron Ruby, Endron Sapphire or Endron Diamond, he had made a buying decision for the life of his car. Any attempt to switch back to any other brand

of gasoline, regardless of grade or purity, resuscitated the knocking and pinging worse than ever before. What was more interesting is that cars that previously not exhibited knocks and pings began doing so after a single gallon of Endron high-end gasoline, if the cars' owners were so foolish as to try another brand of gasoline. As incredible as it seemed, Endron engineers found a way to make cars dependent on the unique makeup of their particular brands of gasoline, and to make those cars suffer a marked decrease in performance if they were filled up with anything else. Several lawsuits and at least one federal investigation into the matter are in process, but the smart money says that Endron's going to win the suits and get away with no more than a slap on the wrist from the Feds.

At the moment, Endron seems quite satisfied with the progress of Fall 98 #2 and has ordered a round of follow-up commercials. Furthermore, research engineers (with a little help from the special labs) are working hard to find a way to add that same "addictive" quality to other Endron products, particularly motor oil and diesel fuel.

The Half-Full Tank

One of the more devious approaches taken by Endron over the past few years involves the mechanisms on their service station pumps by which the flow of gasoline is regulated. In an ideal world, if the pump reads that 4 gallons of gas has been pumped, four gallons of gas have made their way into your tank, and so on. With Endron, that's not always the case.

In 1994, an Endron engineer named Willie Quesada made a fascinating discovery: The standards and practices engineers whose job it was to make sure that the readings on the pumps matched the outflow of gasoline had a very strict procedural regimen. Specifically, they tested five and 10 gallon increments, and nothing else. Seeing this, Quesada tinkered with a standard Endron fuel pump and came up with something that lagged up to 33% behind the recorded fill rate and only caught up at five-gallon intervals. In other words, if the testers checked to make sure they got the five gallons they were supposed to, they'd find everything was in working order – but if they tried to test for four gallons, they'd find themselves with only 3.

Ecstatic with Quesada's work, Endron put his devices into every pump they owned. The decision boosted profits from gasoline service concerns 14% over the course of the first year it was in operation, and refinements to the device have made the number climb ever since. Quesada was handsomely rewarded for his ingenuity, and now works at headquarters in an advisory position linked to the "special labs." He doesn't get out much these days, but claims he's perfectly happy indoors, where the sun doesn't hurt his eyes quite so much. In the meantime, his invention, accomplished without the aid of anything supernatural, continues to pump money from consumers' pockets to Endron's coffers at an unseemly rate. Even the most twisted fomer couldn't have done any better.

Motor Oil

One might expect that if Endron were going to poison the world, it would do so through its gasoline. After all, that is the company's most important product by volume. It gets in more cars, goes more places and has the potential to pollute that much more than anything else.

And that is precisely why, apart from the knocks and pings issue, Endron plays it straight with its gasoline. After all, "widespread" is another way of saying "lots of evidence left behind," and evidence is something Endron still has to concern itself about.

So, instead the company plays some nasty tricks with one of its lesser products, namely, its motor oil. Approximately one can in every hundred gets a little something extra on its way out of the refinery. Specifically, what gets added is a bane-generated corrosive substance that manages to find its way out of the engine and the oil pan and into the rest of the car that it's put into. Sometimes it ends up in the transmission, sometimes in the fuel line and sometimes in even stranger places. What is a constant, however, is the effect the stuff has, namely, disaster. Whatever the corrosive gets into (and the stuff seems frighteningly intelligent in its choices sometimes) gets chewed up and dissolved in an appallingly short time. That means first leaks, then breakdowns. It means transmission fluid on the roads and driveways and cars conked out in traffic in the middle of rush hour. The direct environmental impact is small, but the extra gas burned and exhaust produced by a well-placed traffic jam is something the company delights in. And if the delay causes a less-than-balanced individual to snap and succumb to "road rage," then so much the better.

Several abortive attempts have been made to trace a connection between certain types of automotive breakdown and certain brands of gasoline, but no one has yet thought to look for a connection in the motor oil. Needless to say, Endron is spending a fair bit of money to make sure it stays that way.

The Minimarts

The mini-markets attached to Endron stations are called "End Runs." The pun is abominable, but it makes the wares sold within look that much better by comparison. End Run markets carry a line of products comparable to that of any of their direct competitors: snack foods, beverages, basic school supplies and toiletries, some automotive supplies and in states that allow it, fireworks and beer. Most have hot dog grills where customers can buy "fresh" frankfurters, as well as fresh donut stands, hot coffee and in some instances, cappuccino machines. Individual operators are free to sell adult magazines and the like if they choose, but company-owned stations do not carry them; this decision is in keeping with the wholesome "family" image the company wants to project.

Emissions Standards

Endron has always been a staunch foe of any sort of automobile emissions standards. The company fought the introduction of the catalytic converter tooth and nail, and continues to fight each new regulation aimed at cleaning up what comes out of Detroit's automobile factories. That opposition often takes the form of expensive advertising campaigns, funding political action committees and the like, which strikes observers as somewhat curious. After all, it's the automobile manufacturers who are feeling the pinch from the new regulations these days, not the oil companies. Endron will continue to sell gasoline regardless of what Washington tells Chrysler to do. Indeed, the increasing green-friendliness of domestic cars has been cited as one of the biggest reasons for an upswing in sales of those models over the past seven years, and more cars on the road means more gasoline going down their gullets.

Yet Endron persists in fighting each piece of clean air legislation quietly but viciously, even in a time when many of the company's competitors are publicly lining up behind the cause of clean air. The tactic seems odd, and it has not gone without notice. Several environmental groups and at least one regulatory agency have targeted Endron for preliminary investigation as a result of this odd behavior, and already the sniffing at some of the company's shadier activities has begun. What has been, oddly enough, a matter of principle for Endron may yet help cause the firm's downfall.

Is there anything particularly sinister about the End Run markets as they are currently configured? No. They're just omnipresent, a part of the landscape that people simply take for granted. That, of course, is the danger. When Endron decides to use the minimarts to their best advantage, it will be able to do so with the knowledge that it will be affecting the entire unsuspecting continent, from coast to coast, almost simultaneously.

High Speed, High Visibility

One of the fastest-growing sports in America is NASCAR, which by its very nature is conducive to Endron's advertising needs. After all, the sport combines the purest sort of slavish devotion to the automobile with a built-in expectation of garish, obtrusive advertising. It's rare to find a square inch of a driver's car or uniform that isn't covered by some advertiser's logo or other. The advantage of this arrangement to the advertiser is obvious. For a reasonable cash outlay, the advertiser gets its name on television during each race of the season. If the car the company is sponsoring is a winner, then its logo gets that much more airtime. After all, whoever is broadcasting the race is going to spend most of its camera time

following the front-runners. If one of those front-runners sports your logo, the theory goes, then you've made a very wise advertising buy.

Endron, needless to say, prefers to make wise advertising buys. If that means subverting the spirit of fair and honest competition to ensure more airtime for the #77 car (sponsored primarily by Endron), then the hell with the spirit of fair and honest competition. Of course, with strict NASCAR regulation on everything from tire size to maximum engine RPMs to just about anything imaginable, technological tinkering for an unfair advantage is nigh-impossible. That's why Endron doesn't use tech to cheat. It uses the supernatural.

While the notion of supernatural cheating at a NASCAR race, of all things, seems ludicrous. After all, setting fomori loose to poke holes in the opposition's tires is, at best, silly. If nothing else, strange people (let alone strange creatures) skulking around Pit Row are liable to be bounced by pit security in a matter of seconds even if they're not doing something odd. Pit Row is a very dangerous place, after all, and anyone there who isn't supposed to be can cause a dangerous – or fatal – accident. And while that sort of thing may be tempting in the short run, in the long run it inevitably leads to tighter restrictions, in-depth investigations and so forth. In other words, it's a strategy of limited utility.

On the other hand, while NASCAR officials may be able to measure tire width with uncanny accuracy, they're not set up to handle spirits in the gas tank or Banes in the brake line. That's how Endron does its dirty work. While the team's pit crew and driver are completely unaware of any untoward assistance they receive, the Endron team behind the racing outfit is as dirty – and inhuman – as they come. The roster of their stratagems is surprisingly large: turning spirits of corruption loose on other teams' tires and equipment, siccing Enticers on opposing drivers before races, using supernatural means to enhance the performance of the Endron team car (and no emissions test yet devised can sniff out Wyrms-taint) and so on. The end result is calamity and often grievous harm for Endron's competitors, as the Banes' work is punctuated with high speed crashes and the odd resultant fatality. At the same time, the #77 car does surprisingly well despite the team's remarkably high driver turnover. (The latter is a source of some concern on the NASCAR circuit, where Team Endron is referred to as "Team Chew 'Em Up and Spit 'Em Out." Over the last five seasons, Endron has employed no fewer than four primary drivers. Two met with fatal accidents off the racetrack, one contracted cancer and the fourth, Bobby LaTournier, is starting to show signs of extreme fatigue and hypertension.)

While at first it may seem odd to see Endron devoting such an intense effort to such a small component of its empire, a closer look reveals that it's eminently sensible to do so. After all, NASCAR reaches millions each week.

Each and every one of those fans watching gets to see Endron's logo on a winner. Each and every one of those fans also gets his yen to hit the road in a fast, fast car encouraged – and no gas company can complain about that, either. Plus, if Endron ever figures out a way to keep a driver in one piece long enough to turn him into a celebrity, they'll have the added star power of a Bobby LaTournier – or whoever – advocating their agenda on the cheap as well. Subverting NASCAR one race at a time isn't the key to Endron's strategy. It isn't even a major component. But if the minor components like this can be so devastatingly effective, the imagination boggles at what the major ones might do.

The Faces of Endron

Endron is big business at its finest – and at its worst. Tens of thousands of people, if not more, draw their paychecks from Endron or one of its direct subsidiaries. Within their ranks are saints and frightening sinners (albeit more and more of the latter every day), and thousands upon thousands of absolutely, utterly normal people. But mixed within the serried ranks of Endron employees are a few who, regardless of their relative position, are somehow a bit more effective at doing the Wyrms' work than others. They're just a bit more in tune with their inner corruption, a bit more adept at getting the firm to do their bidding, a bit less human than even their peers.

Alex Molina

Background: A graduate of the New Mexico Institute of Technology, Molina was the very first student ever to pass through Endron's EEPS internship program. Already the recipient of an Endron-sponsored National Merit Scholarship, Molina was thrilled to be offered a summer position in the field with the company. The possibility of employment after graduation was dangled as well, and Molina was eager to sign on. Making things even better, the assignment was in Texas, near Molina's home. Everything looked perfect.

Unfortunately, due to a clerical error Molina got himself assigned to one of the special EEPS units – one assigned to dealing strictly with supernatural occurrences. A half-mile off shore, an Endron drilling platform had found something odd. The EEPS was called in, just in time to watch something greenish and viscous slither its way up the drill and start dissolving members of the platform crew.

Molina saw this before anyone realized that he simply didn't belong there. He watched the horror of it all, and, rather than screaming or fleeing, stood there and took it all in. This, he realized, was what he wanted to do with his life. This was what he really wanted to find. This was his calling. He took a step closer to the entity, eager to see what it was. Then the rest of the team came to their senses and hustled him off the platform.

However, Endron knew by this that it had a keeper. It put Molina through school, hired him straight out of college

and put him to work on an EEPS immediately. The deal has paid dividends undreamed of for Endron, and for Molina himself as well. While in the field, he's uncovered a remarkable range of caerns, mystical artifacts, ancient ruins and, of course, oil deposits, and he has done so with flair, panache and a remarkable facility for bringing his entire team home in one piece. Now he leads Endron's most experienced, most talented EEPS, and does so extremely well. Of course, there's a price to be paid for this sort of success. Whatever's gotten into Molina is aging him at a tremendous rate, and while he's barely 35, he looks almost 60. He wouldn't have it any other way, however. The things he's seen and touched make it all worthwhile.

Lately, Molina has started talking about death. Associates (for he has no close friends) say that he seems oddly cheery about mortality. Indeed, he's seemed almost religious in his discussions of the subject, talking about "what's waiting for him on the other side." In light of what Molina has seen and where he's gone, what that might be can only be imagined.

Image: Alex Molina looks like a hale, hearty man of 60 years of age. He's got a remarkably deep tan and shows all the hallmarks of having worked in the sun for decades. His hands are a working man's hands, callused by years of work in the field, but his movements are very precise, particularly for a man of his apparent age. Molina's hair is white, though he still has most of it, and his eyes are dark brown. He's nearly six feet tall, with a distance runner's build and a narrow, angular face, but most of the time he's smiling.

Roleplaying Hints: What could have been a spectacular career investigating the supernatural got subverted by Endron. You still love uncovering the hidden and unnatural, but now you do it for Endron's purposes. See what's out there, find it and put it to work for the company's ultimate good – that's your motivation, and you're perfectly fine with it. Encourage curiosity in others (if it's appropriate). If not, do your best to humiliate or just plain ditch people who bother you. You're fiercely loyal to your team and to Endron, and to Endron's ultimate goal. Deep down, you're convinced that there are deeper secrets left to uncover, and you're willing to crack the planet wide open to get to them. Endron's methods, in general, are what you'd call a good start.

Recently, you've been contacted by the agents of something not quite of this world. You're not sure if it's a spirit, a ghost or a demon, but it's something you've run across again and again over the years.

And now it wants you. It's willing to offer you power, life after death and certain other inducements, if you'll pledge yourself to its service. Also, it seems intent on steering you and your team toward certain sites, sites which have proven to be very useful for Endron to exploit. Of course, you have lost a couple of team members that way, but surely those deaths were just accidents....

Robert Smythe

Background: Robert is one of Them. He's been one of Them for as long as he can remember, and he expects to be one of Them for the rest of his life. He is content in that knowledge, and content with what he does.

Robert was born to a pair of English immigrants to the United States, and he grew up speaking with a slight but noticeable accent that got him labeled as "different" in school. Robert was a good student, above average but not spectacular, and he cruised along below almost everyone's radar. In college he quickly drifted to a business major, graduated with acceptable grades, and after a few false starts, got a job at the bottom of the Endron corporate ladder.

That was over two decades ago. With slow, steady persistence, Robert moved his way toward the top. He never did anything outstanding, but his performance was steady. Quiet. Efficient. Furthermore, he had a knack for keeping his mouth shut and his eyes open, and it wasn't long before he figured out that something was very odd about the hierarchy of power.

The Hideous Truth

What are They? "What" is the operative word, for "They" no longer deserve the word "who" applied to Them. In simplest terms, They are the guardians of Endron, infused with and motivated by the monstrous spirit of the corporation itself. Whether Endron somehow brought this entity into existence or the company's policies attracted and molded it is open to debate, but the unvarnished truth is that Endron has become much more than just a company. It has become a presence, and that presence wants to take very, very good care of its physical representation.

That's where They come in. While the spirit can't affect the company directly, it can influence individuals, and they (or They) can act to ensure the organization's well-being. So it watches, and it waits, and when a likely candidate comes along, it seizes him.

For all intents and purposes, then, They are extensions of a single consciousness. They still maintain Their identities, more or less – after all, They'd be less effective without them – but each is now part of the greater consciousness of the firm itself. Each will act in perfect harmony with the others and perfect accordance with the guiding spirit's wishes, and each will do whatever is necessary, up to and including sacrificing himself, to protect the company.

Incidentally, They always retire after 30 years of service with the company. Few survive more than a few months afterwards, as the spirit withdraws from them after they go. And without the spirit moving them, they're simply lost.



In short, he was everything They were looking for. So They reached out and tapped him on the shoulder. They told Robert who they were and what they were doing, and that he was going to become a part of Them.

Robert, unsurprisingly, accepted. Shortly thereafter, he received a promotion to the lofty position of Senior Credit Manager (Exports), and the full indoctrination from the rest of Them.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Image: Smythe is approximate five and a half feet tall. He has black hair that's going gray at the temples, a round face with blue eyes, and a fair complexion that looks as if it burns very easily in the sun. Robert always dresses very conservatively (no one has ever seen him wear anything but a blue or gray suit to work) and wears round-rimmed glasses that magnify the moonish appearance of his face. Often he carries an umbrella with him; "You never know when it's going to rain," he says.

Roleplaying Hints: You always know what They want done. It's marvelous, really – you all manage to reach consensus without speaking. What one of you wants done, you all want done. What you want for yourself, on the other hand, is essentially unimportant. After all, it's the health of the company that's important. You, and the others like you, are just parts of a greater whole.

Dr. Michelle Backman, Ph.D.

Background: It takes a remarkable combination of intelligence, dedication and willpower to make it through NYU's five year MD/Ph.D. program in one piece. It takes something entirely inhuman to do it in four years.

Fortunately for her, inhuman is precisely what Michelle Backman has become. Always driven to excel, she took the process a bit too far and ended up hosting a spirit of pure, twisted ambition. Now, the entity that was (and still mostly is) Michelle is one of the leading researchers in the dreaded secret labs. She's worked her way up from new hire to star performer, in the process perfecting the pheromone traps that Endron puts along its pipelines along with other, more esoteric innovations. She's also killed at least three immediate supervisors, though ever the conscientious scientist, she managed to utilize the cadavers in her research. Indeed, her efficiency at disposing of the bodies can only be matched by the efficiency with which she put those bodies to use. However, all reports agree that Backman's promotions in such tragic circumstances generally bring results. If nothing else, the surviving researchers tend to work much harder for her than they do for anyone else.

At the moment, Backman is the second most senior researcher in her division. Currently, she's working on ways to turn oil-eating bacteria into disease-causing organisms, though she has a few "personal" projects going as well. In the

meantime, other Endron researchers clamor for the right to be in Backman's lab. She always has the best equipment, the most funding and the most interesting work for junior researchers to do.

After all, there's something to be said for being the one even senior management is afraid of.

Image: Backman is nobody's image of a successful, experienced research scientist. She looks all of perhaps 24, with straight blonde hair, icy blue eyes and a healthy, if not overly voluptuous figure. However, Backman is all business, in and out of the lab. Her mode of dress is severe when it's not pragmatically professional, and woe betide anyone who works in her lab who doesn't live up to her standards of dress, posture and performance.

Roleplaying Hints: You are absolutely in control. Endron is a means to an end to you; your ultimate goal is your own spin-off company with full autonomy and the right to keep – and profit from – your work. Everyone else is measured by their utility to you, and you have no problems removing someone who's an obstacle to your professional ambitions. You don't even have problems removing someone who's an annoyance, if it's worth the time and effort to do so. You have little to say to anyone outside your lab unless they're either giving you funding or a potential lab rat. Fortunately, the latter are plentiful.

Story Ideas

What to do with an energy company in the World of Darkness? Garou can't just go around blowing up random Endron stations, tempting though it might be. After all, large gasoline explosions tend to attract notice, in addition to being a somewhat less than environmentally sound habit to get into. Besides, with a corporation as diverse and multi-faceted as Endron, there are literally dozens of ways you can go in order to work the firm into your game.

Where?

First, figure out where your game is. Endron is truly global in scope, with operations ranging from drilling stations in the Antarctic to deep sea platforms in the North Sea. Anywhere the Garou go, Endron can be there as a foe. On the other hand, figuring out what part of the world your game is in also dictates what sort of Endron operation the characters are likely to be facing. The odds of running into an EEPS in the Indonesian jungle are much higher than they are of running into one on the streets of New York. By the same token, what are the odds that a "special" labs researcher is going to be anywhere but her lab – unless, of course, she's got something to field test. Establishing your location also helps you figure out what sort of Endron-influenced villains you're going to throw out there.

Who?

Geography may give you some of the clues to who your Endron connections are, but you still need to nail it down. Once you establish your field of play, you can think about who should be there logically and where they fit into the Endron hierarchy. That also lets you figure out what exactly your Endron characters are capable of. After all, just because you're setting your campaign in the wildcatting fields of Texas doesn't mean you automatically know if you've got an EEPS scouting a new location, a full-fledged drilling operation or something even more sinister.

Why?

Endron is a big company, but even big companies do things for a reason. Figure out what Endron wants and how that intersects with the characters. Maybe it's just routine business, getting the gas to market in a way that interferes with the characters' business. Maybe it's something a field team is testing or on the verge of uncovering. Maybe it's just a humdrum oil slick or fuel oil spill. The point is, however, that Endron has a reason for going where it goes, a reason for sending the people it does and investing the money it spends and a definite goal in mind when it gets in gear. Doping out what the Endron team on site wants helps you set up your conflict – it could be that they could care less about the Garou, so long as they get the pipeline up and running.

Story Ideas

- **Race to the Finish:** The pack is checking out rumors of a lost, unguarded caern when they discover evidence that someone else is looking for something in the area. It's an Endron EEPS, and they're running hell bent for leather after something. But what? Is it the same thing the pack is after? And if it is, what sort of nasty surprises might the team pull on a handful of Garou who get a little too cocky about dealing with mere humans.

- **Meltdown Blues:** The characters get warning of an incipient disaster at an Endron-owned nuclear plant. They've got to get in and find some way to prevent the catastrophe while getting past guards who may well think that they *are* the catastrophe. And what about Endron itself, which just might want the plant to blow if there are Garou who might get caught in the fireworks.

- **Tanker Troubles:** The Soul of Endron (Liberian registry) is in trouble. It's taking on water, its near dangerous reefs and there's a storm coming on. Also, it's crewed by fomori who seem to have acquired a communal death wish. In hopes of preventing ecological disaster, the pack claws its way onto the ship just before the storm. Can they salvage the tanker and its cargo before tide and wind dash it onto the rocks? Can they survive long enough even to try?

• **Blackout:** Someone pulls the Oops switch and the characters' current location is plunged into darkness. This is no ordinary blackout, however – Pentex is using the chaos as cover for field-testing some new creations. In other words, the Bad Things have come out to play in the middle of fire, riot and blood. The chaos isn't going to stop until the lights come back on, and with all of the monsters loose in the streets, making that happen may be impossible.

• **The Awakening:** The pack follows an EEPS team on the trail of something ancient and evil slumbering beneath desert sands. They catch up with their foes deep beneath the surface of the earth, but too late: the monstrous entity is waking up. Now they're trapped underground, but so is the EEPS. Can an alliance be made for the sake of survival? Can the Endron employees be trusted, or are they in league with beast below? What if it's all a setup for the Garou's benefit? There's only one way to find out.







Magadon—Building a better you.

Mission Statement

Magadon, Incorporated is a leading provider of pharmaceutical products and services. Magadon originates, develops, and propagates a wide spectrum of cutting-edge techniques and products to improve the human condition.

Our Mission

The mission of Magadon is fourfold:

To provide human society with services and products that improve the quality of life through promoting better health and personal satisfaction;

To provide our employees with self-affirming tasks, generous rewards, and self-determined opportunities for advancement;

To provide our investors with the best possible rate of return on their holdings;

To provide the scientific community with continual advances in biomedical knowledge, both pure and applied.

Our Values

Our goal is the preservation, extension, and improvement of human life. The success of all our efforts is measured by the advancement of this goal. Our foremost value is the contribution that we make to humanity in its pursuit.

We are committed to responsibility to those affected by our actions at all levels. We are responsible to our consumers, to our employees, to the communities in which we conduct operations, and to the societies through which we channel those operations. Our interactions with all these parties must bear the highest levels of integrity, ethics, and professionalism.

We are a scientifically-minded organization whose research is directed toward the improvement of the human condition and the quality of life on Earth. We continually direct our research toward the most critical needs of our consumers and humanity at large.

We direct our business operations toward revenue, but only from actions that benefit our customers and humanity. Our ability to maintain our values and continue taking actions that further those values depends on our ability to function as a business entity.

We recognize that our organization is composed of individuals, and seek to better each one of those individuals' lives through their work for us. We value the qualities of integrity, skill, knowledge, teamwork, and imagination in our employees, and we seek to create a working environment that fosters those qualities in each and every member of the Magadon team.

Magadon, Incorporated

Overview

Magadon is a multinational corporation devoted to all areas of medical research, service, and production. It began in 1946 as Magadon Limited, a small medical research company founded by Bryant Vandegrift, a retired U.S. Army doctor. From its original headquarters in New Jersey, Magadon has since expanded its operations to over 70 facilities in two dozen countries. With net earnings of \$8.115 billion last year, Magadon is among the world's leading pharmaceutical corporations.

Areas of Business

Research: Magadon creates, develops, and extensively tests health products at ten major research centers in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Manufacturing: Magadon produces, formulates, and packages its products in 68 plants in North and South America, Europe, and Southwest Asia.

Marketing: Magadon products are sold over 70% of the world.

Services: Magadon provides low-cost pharmaceutical advising to medical providers across the world, as well as pharmacy benefits plans for more than 180 million people. It also participates in government-sponsored anti-drug abuse programs, providing free counseling and rehabilitation centers for those who suffer from dependence on illicit substances.

Products

Magadon produces over 600 different products for all applications and areas of use, including:

- cardiovascular wellness
- dermatology
- gastrointestinal comfort
- neurological and psychological treatment
- respiratory wellness
- vaccines and antibiotics
- planned parenthood
- veterinary operations and treatment

Magadon's products range from direct medical use to prescription medicines to over-the-counter remedies.

Financial Profile

The following figures show Magadon's financial information for the last full fiscal year:

Total sales: \$24.843 billion

Net income: \$5.115 billion

Research budget: \$2.34 billion (approximate)

Magadon trades on the NYSE as MgDn. Over the last fiscal year, its stock was valued between \$71 and \$92 per share.

Magadon: History

In October 1946, a doctor named Bryant Vandegrift retired from the Army Medical Corps at the rank of brigadier general. Together with four of his former subordinates, Vandegrift founded a small research firm named Magadon Limited in Trenton, NJ. This company's focus was on counter-biological warfare: they developed vaccines for diseases that might be used as weapons in future wars. By 1950, Magadon Limited had five research contracts with the United States Army and one with the United Nations, and construction began on a new research facility in West Virginia.

Army records place Vandegrift in China in 1945 and '46. Presumably, he was dealing with the Japanese research centers. Japan was more heavily into bioweapons research than Germany was; they're known to have been looking at anthrax and other juicy pathogens, and they were testing a lot of this stuff on Chinese citizens during their occupation. Still unclear whether V. was cleaning up for the greater good or just stockpiling for the US Army. It might be possible to ask him — rumor has it he's still around, running under heavy doses of one of the aging-retardation drugs that the Big P gives its upper management.

Magadon made its first outside acquisition in 1952: Panflex Incorporated, a manufacturer of general antibiotics with facilities in Ohio and Illinois. Over the next four years, Magadon bought out a dozen more small pharmaceutical and medical firms, including Thriuson, Campesi Gerontological Research, Panacea Pharmaceuticals, and Kipling-Jones. This left Magadon desperately short on capital, as many of its acquisitions were running on the edge of bankruptcy. However, this rapid diversification also placed the company in a position to take advantage of many advances in the medical field.

Note to self: have Early Withdrawal and his team take a look at Campesi. Possible Leech involvement. Even if not, shipping reports seem to indicate a suspiciously large number of deliveries from CGR facilities to high-level Pentex offices. More than a statistical anomaly — pattern goes back at least 15 years.

By 1956, Magadon, Incorporated's future looked bright. It had recovered from the resource depletion that its rapid expansion had caused, and stocks (first made public in 1955) were steadily climbing. The company first went overseas in this year with the acquisition of Dunlop & Farrier, a British firm specializing in cancer treatments.

However, several setbacks halted Magadon's ascent and threatened to destroy the corporation. The company acquired holdings in Germany just in time to be caught by the first reports of Thalidomide-induced birth defects, a scandal that rocked the entire pharmaceutical industry. Shortly thereafter, a containment failure in the West Virginia facility resulted in the death of over 400 scientists and

workers from an unknown virus; only a heavy rainstorm and extensive security precautions kept the biowarfare agent from spreading to nearby communities.

Not to mention the First Team with Racial suits and flamethrowers. Pentex may or may not have engineered the containment breach; they certainly were on hand to assist—much to the chagrin of Magadon security personnel who thought the WV facility was a secret—and took advantage of the situation afterward.

The facility was a complete write-off. At the order of Magadon's board of directors, the site was sterilized and destroyed with military incendiary weapons. Shaken by the close brush with disaster, the board met in a closed session to discuss Magadon's future. What was said in this series of meetings is a matter of conjecture; what is known is that when the board adjourned two weeks later, the groundwork had been laid for Magadon's buyout by a megacorporation named Pentex.

Here, the Wyrms turn up. While it's almost certain that Magadon was doing some Wyrmy things before 1957, the company probably wasn't a focused tool of corruption. It was more of a well-meaning firm with scattered individuals abusing their power and connections. After the buyout, however, all those disparate elements were united under the Pentex banner and they started making contact with each other. Take note, cubs: evil plays the "friend of a friend" networking game too.

The Pentex takeover was completed in late 1959. Magadon was able to pay off its last few outstanding debts (both acquisition-related and a handful of product liability lawsuits) with the huge influx of ready capital that the buyout gave it. However, some of the board of directors objected to the restructuring and policy changes that Pentex demanded. Pentex extended the restructuring to upper management, and the objectors were paid off handsomely and replaced with newly-promoted former division heads who were more amenable to Pentex's "suggestions."

At least two Magadon board members who had ethical objections to Pentex policies were given nine millimeter retirement packages. Of the other four who left around this time, two died of apparently natural causes and one quietly disappeared in the late 80's. The last one, Matthew Daviess, was a co-founder of Magadon Limited. The First Team that was sent after Daviess was found messily dead in his laboratory—he skipped out the back door as they were coming in the front and left them an open canister of a VX derivative with a corrosive component that ate through their protective gear. He's still in Pentex's files as a "shoot on sight" threat to corporate security, which implies that they believe he's still out there. Odd note: the photo that Pentex keeps on record shows Daviess to be in his late twenties, even though he was 45 when he disappeared and is pushing 90 now. They may be too incompetent to update, or there may be something else there.

Once the initial shakeup following the Pentex takeover was complete, Magadon took off with renewed vigor. Its strong corporate partnership with Autumn Health Management Systems, another Pentex-held corporation, gave it a guaranteed market share as well as access to an entire network of hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, and related facilities. Magadon also took advantage of the Pentex ICS to implement advanced market analysis techniques, giving the company several legs up on its competition. Between 1958 and 1998, Magadon went from a 12.8% market share to a 22.5% share, making it one of the three largest pharmaceutical companies in the world. With its recent takeover of Aesop Research and the rumors of an upcoming merger with Autumn, it looks like Pentex may be setting Magadon up to be the dominant global health care provider by the end of the next decade.

And that, cubs, is why we don't trust doctors.

—Matthew Stormheart

Using Magadon

Magadon is Pentex's second largest subsidiary, exceeded only by Endron in size and profitability. However, contrary to some expectations, Magadon isn't a proportionally significant agent of direct corruption. If Endron is the flagship of Pentex's corporate fleet, Magadon is the Wyrms' own submarine. The health industry is one of the most heavily-scrutinized, both by governments and by private individuals, so Magadon operations are both lower-scale and more subtle than many of Pentex's other tasks of corruption and decay. Many of the Magadon projects detailed in the following pages aren't the kind of thing that the typical combat-oriented group of player characters is equipped to handle: a softer touch is called for. Storytellers whose chronicles concentrate on kicking the Wyrms' ass, one Black Spiral at a time, may want to give Magadon a pass. Those who are more oriented toward horror and intrigue, however, will find much here that's ideal for their games.

Personal Horror

In many ways, Magadon is the most terrifying of the Pentex companies, both for characters and for their players. Oil spills and deforestation are external threats, ones that can be attacked or run away from. It's a lot harder to fight an enemy that you've been putting into your own body for the past few years. Storytellers are urged to take their players' twitches into account. Lots of people harbor negative feelings toward the pharmaceutical industry—and toward health care in general. There are a lot of personal horror stories out there, from nearly-fatal allergic reactions to botched surgeries. Be careful that your pursuit of a better story doesn't infringe on your players' emotional comfort.

Ethical Conflicts

Magadon is, in large part, a legitimate company with caring, well-meaning employees who truly want to do their

best for humanity. Although the company is a tool of the Wyrms, it is also a tool of the untainted medical industry. Don't hesitate to confront players with deep moral questions if their characters decide to destroy a Magadon facility or crash a section of MagNet — will the data and resources denied Pentex be worth the innocent human lives that the loss of legitimate medical research may cost? There shouldn't be an easy answer to this one. Make the players think; make the characters sleep restlessly.

A Note on "Reality"

Magadon is a fictional corporation, as are all those presented in this book. However, the pharmaceutical industry is all too real — and in some ways, the real one is as disturbing as the fictional one that's shown here. The author made extensive use of a pharmaceutical manual published by a major real-world drug company in writing this chapter. Over a third of the drugs he read up on aren't fully understood: the companies producing them and the doctors prescribing them don't completely know how they work. Although we like to think of modern medicine as perfect, mistakes are made every day. Thalidomide really was used as described here, and thousands of people are still living with its legacy. Chemical and biological weapons are real and terrifying parts of modern warfare, and they exist despite dozens of limiting treaties. Every single substance that's in the *Magadon Manual* section exists in the real world, and the effects described there are as accurate as possible, both in the storytelling information and in the game mechanics. If this is slightly disturbing, it should be.

Corporate Organization

Magadon's corporate structure is arranged on a slightly haphazard model. Each operational division (every division but Administration and Sales & Marketing is classed as "operational") has its own specialized internal bureaucracy and its own research arm. This inefficient distribution of tasks leads to a great deal of duplication of effort, but it also allows the corporation to micromanage itself to a painfully fine degree.

Administration

Magadon's Administration division is the "paperwork production" arm of the conglomerate. In theory, Administration handles all of the bureaucratic tasks, both external and internal, that keep a multinational conglomerate functioning. This broad spectrum of tasking leaves the upper echelons of the operational divisions free to pursue research and profit. In practice, however, Administration is an organizational dinosaur mired in a tar pit of inefficiency. Salaries for Administration personnel tend to be about 10% higher than those received by employees who hold comparable positions in other divisions, which means there's a great deal of constant struggle as operational executives wrangle for transfers to Administration in order to ride out their last few years before retirement. This pattern of end-of-tenure trans-

fer perpetually deprives the operational divisions of competent upper-echelon leaders.

From a staffing perspective, Administration is the single largest division of Magadon, as it has constantly swollen over the years. It encompasses such diverse tasks as legal defense and consultation, salary disbursement, human resources oversight, and corporate information systems. Magadon employees in the company's other divisions generally resent Admin staffers, who they see as privileged and overpaid. Admin members, by contrast, view employees of the operational divisions as too focused and short-sighted to understand all the balls that Admin has to keep in the air, and justify their higher salaries and a fatter benefits package by telling themselves that they are the ones who really keep the company running. As might be expected, cooperation between Admin and the rest of the company is limited to the bare minimum required by professional courtesies.

Susan —

Tell those virus jugglers down in ID that their budget request for electric fencing is denied. They can keep their subjects under control just fine with the traps the last inventory showed a surplus of. If they can't file project surveys on time, they're not getting one cent more for "security measures." What sort of security do they think they need for a bunch of rhesus monkeys?

— Jerry

One advantage of Admin's bureaucratic bloating is that its offices and databases are gold mines of knowledge — Admin never throws anything away, preferring to store hardcopy records dating back to the company's founding in huge data warehouses. If any item of information was ever written down in an official Magadon context, it can be found somewhere in this division. Administration also controls the aging Magadon computer systems, including MagNet, the wide-area network that connects every single Magadon facility. MagNet suffered minor Y2K-related problems, but the Information Systems department was able to restore full functionality within a week of the new year. Admin's latest project is the expansion of MagNet to all Magadon clients. By placing remote terminals in hospitals and pharmacies across the globe, Magadon will be able to provide cutting-edge service, filling orders and answering queries almost instantaneously.

Sales and Marketing (Sales/Mktg)

The other Magadon division that's not classed as operational, Sales and Marketing (sometimes referred to as S&M, but only unofficially) is responsible for getting Magadon's diverse products onto the market and keeping the company's public image sparkling clean. Sales and Marketing controls Magadon's army of sales reps, whose smiling faces and sample-filled briefcases are familiar sights to many doctors

and pharmacists. This division is responsible for Magadon's newspaper and magazine ads, radio and television commercials, billboards, free informational pamphlets and flyers, 1-800 answer lines, corporate web site, and college recruiters. Nine times out of ten, the Magadon employees that the general public sees will be from Sales and Marketing. Magadon's most extroverted, photogenic, and socially adept staffers are found in this division.

Sales and Marketing does, however, have the unhappy task of minimizing the damage done to the company's image when a scandal erupts. S&M's Media Crisis Teams are on 24-hour call, ready to instantly respond to any negative media report involving a Magadon product. Within an hour of any such story being released anywhere in the world, Magadon is guaranteed to have issued a press release to keep the public informed of the corporation's efforts to resolve the situation. This expert treatment isn't limited to Magadon's interests alone: one MCT, operating out of the corporate headquarters, is completely devoted to minimizing the negative press received by Magadon's competitors, an altruistic gesture which Magadon plays off as "being for the greater good of the industry." After all, drugs are drugs in the public eye, and anything that hurts one pharmaceutical provider has the potential to hurt all of them. This program pays off in enhanced goodwill among the industry's big players — though marketing struggles have not at all lessened in their fierceness, Magadon has managed to begin a program of research sharing between itself and its major competitors "in the interest of public health."

Gerontology (GerDiv)

Gerontology is the medical study of aging and the aged. This division specializes in drugs and techniques to treat the debilities of the elderly, from Alzheimer's to arthritis. GerDiv frequently cross-shares research with other Magadon divisions, as its field of study overlaps with many others — for example, both Gerontology and Genetics are studying ways to slow or stop the aging process, and many of the ailments that Infectious Diseases studies have radically different manifestations in elderly victims than they do in younger subjects. GerDiv's research is thus as much refinement of the work of other divisions as it is self-originated.

GerDiv's largest area of contact with the public is in Pentex-affiliated nursing homes. Many such facilities serve as centers for voluntary testing programs, pushing the cutting edge of geriatric medicine while providing high-quality care for those elderly individuals who need assistance in their day-to-day lives.

Pediatrics (Peds)

At the opposite end of the age spectrum from gerontology is pediatric medicine, which is the medical study of individuals under the age of 18. Magadon's Pediatrics division is a mirror image of the Gerontology division in many ways, particularly the manner in which it shares studies with other divisions and refines existing work to a sharper focus. In the

past decade, Peds' most ambitious and well-known project, conducted jointly with PsychDiv, has been an extended program of research into juvenile behavioral and emotional disorders. This project has borne many fruits, including several antidepressant treatments that are specifically geared for the more dynamic metabolisms of young people.

Women's Medicine (FemMed)

The Women's Medicine division is devoted to reproductive medicine, including gynecology and neonatal care. It produces both fertility drugs and contraceptives, and has task groups devoted to developing safer, less expensive techniques for both childbirth and abortion. This latter field of study has drawn a small amount of attention to Magadon from various conservative interest groups, a situation with which Sales and Marketing is none too pleased. Magadon takes the official stance that its female customers have the right to regulate the functions of their own bodies, and this view is rabidly supported by the division's director.

Infectious Diseases (ID)

ID (a.k.a. "Virus Jugglers" as in-house gallows humor's field of study is medical microbiology: fungi, bacteria and viruses that are harmful to human health. This division develops treatments, cures, and vaccines for problems that range from relatively benign skin fungus to the most deadly strains of Ebola. ID's research budget is the largest of any Magadon division, and it tends to recruit the largest share of talented scientists for its labs. This division rarely deals directly with the public, as most of its products are vaccines and antibiotics that are distributed to hospitals and clinics rather than sold directly. However, an estimated 60% of Americans have received at least one Magadon-produced vaccine, simply due to the volume of production that ID generates.

Genetics (GenDiv)

The newest Magadon division, Genetics was established in 1986. It is an almost entirely research-oriented division, as very little of its work has immediate bearing on the general public. While many other genetic research programs focus on improving the human species as a whole, this would ultimately be counterproductive to Magadon's long-term profitability — if humanity is improved to the point that it doesn't need drugs, what's a pharmaceutical company to do? Instead, most of GenDiv's work focuses on identifying the causes of cancer and other illnesses that are (or are suspected to be) genetic in origin, and on developing new treatments for them.

Nutritional Health (NHDiv)

The national chain of GHN (General Health and Nutrition) stores is the primary outlet for Nutritional Health products. GHN stores, located in strip malls across the United States and Canada, carry hundreds of vitamins, health foods and dietary supplements for the nutrition-conscious consumer. Nutritional Health also markets prod-

ucts such as sports drinks and high-carbohydrate foods for athletes and athlete-wannabes. This program has been kicked into high gear in the past few years, with Sales & Marketing collaborating with Nutritional Health to launch an aggressive advertising campaign. The GHN mascots, Gordon the Gecko (promoter of Lizard-Leap sports drinks — Unleash Your Inner Lizard!) and Gnash the Gator (who pushes high-energy Chaos Bars), are featured on a wide array of spin-off products, from T-shirts to keychains. GHN's business has nearly doubled since the campaign began, and the chain has won acclaim from parents' groups across the United States for raising nutrition and fitness consciousness among the nation's youth.

Psychiatric Therapy (PsychDiv)

While PsychDiv's province is mental health, its work primarily concentrates on chemical rather than psychiatric therapy — after all, Magadon is a drug company first and foremost. PsychDiv provides psychiatrists with a wide array of substances for treating behavioral imbalances. Recent Sales & Marketing survey work has suggested that many individuals avoid chemical treatment for emotional problems because of fear of drugs' side-effects, so PsychDiv is working on "low-impact" antidepressants that are much less likely to cause unwanted results.

Consumer Products (CP)

Magadon's over-the-counter drugs come from Consumer Products. From antihistamines to painkillers, analgesics to foot powders, adhesive bandages to eye drops, a huge array of supermarket and drugstore items is made by this division. Magadon sells CP products under several subsidiary labels, and it's not uncommon to see two competing CP products on the same store shelf. Unless the consumer reads the fine print, however, it's not obvious that either choice sends money back to the same corporation. CP's are the Magadon products most often encountered by the average citizen, but the division has several dozen brand names so most consumers never make the Magadon connection.

Hey, should they be doing that?

Many of the enterprises that Magadon indulges in aren't the sort of thing that one would expect a pharmaceutical corporation to do. However, Magadon is the second-largest Pentex subsidiary, second only to Endron Oil. It's ostensibly a drug company, but its gradual program of acquisition has ensured that it's got its bureaucratic fingers in virtually every sector of the medical field, as well as some areas that seem completely unrelated at first glance. Magadon's recent acquisition of Aesop Research Company has led some to speculate that Pentex intends Magadon to be its only internal medical corporation, and that a merger with Autumn Health Management Systems is inevitable.

Technologies and Applications (Techs and Apps)

The "hardware" division of Magadon, Technologies and Applications (never "T&A" in official context) handles medical and pharmaceutical equipment and spin-off products rather than the actual chemicals that are the company's primary source of income. Techs and Apps is responsible for such diverse items as syringes, centrifuges, rubber gloves and electronic scales. These products are rarely noted for being the best in the industry, but they're still in widespread use because Magadon distributes a large portion of Techs and Apps products to doctors and pharmacists as promotional material.

Public Health (PubHealth)

Better known as Metcalf Clinics in the public eye, this division works closely with Sales and Marketing, and its products and programs are highly visible to the general public. Public Health's largest task is managing drug rehabilitation clinics and associated research. Many major American and European cities have a Magadon-owned detox center. However, Public Health projects are rarely attributed to Magadon, as this division usually operates under the Metcalf Clinics banner in conjunction with its Pentex sister company, August Health Management Systems. This division also handles Magadon's involvement in the related fields of contraceptives and abortion clinics, working in cooperation with the Women's Medicine division. Finally, Public Health supplies Magadon products to public health clinics at extremely low costs.

Veterinary Products (VetDiv)

One of the least-recognized Magadon divisions, this deals with the health of animals rather than that of people. While this may seem at odds with Magadon's drive to "improve the human condition," the company recognizes that other species are essential to humanity, whether as companions, labor assistants, or food sources. In some ways, VetDiv's job is the most complex of any division of the company — while all the other divisions deal with one species, this one has to focus on several hundred or more. However, none of these receive the depth of focus that humanity does.

Movers and Shakers

Bryant Vandegrift

Born in 1901, Vandegrift enlisted in the Army after completing medical school at Harvard. His initial assignment was to a veteran's hospital in Colorado, where he was responsible for caring for victims of the Great War's gas attacks. Over the next decade, he was quickly promoted on the merit of his research, which focused on defenses for the nascent technologies of chemical and biological warfare. When the Second World War broke out, Vandegrift was assigned to Fort Detrick, where he was in charge of Army efforts to identify and counter the plague weapons that Japan was rumored to be testing in occupied China. After the defeat of Japan, he led an Allied

task force that established treatment centers for the victims of this experimentation. Vandegrift retired from the Army in late 1946 and, together with four of his staff officers, founded Magadon, Limited. He remained Magadon's CEO until his retirement in 1962.

Anderson Mertz

Colonel Mertz was General Vandegrift's second in command from 1939 through 1946, when he retired from the Army and co-founded Magadon. Mertz specialized in neurochemical research, and oversaw Magadon's program to develop nerve gas antidotes until his death in a 1963 lab accident. The Magadon Neurological Research Center in Osaka, Japan is dedicated to his memory.

James Graystone

Formerly the Director of Psychiatric Therapy, Dr. Graystone became Magadon's CEO in 1996 after the previous CEO, Harold Hines, experienced a "stress-related aneurysm." Under Graystone, Magadon has begun a program of acquisition in the health care field, buying up a score of smaller companies that have little or no direct involvement in the pharmaceutical industry. His leadership style is best characterized as cautious and methodical, a direct contrast to his flamboyant personal life. Graystone was briefly involved in a 1994 scandal over an illegal casino run by a New York crime syndicate, but his reputation suffered only minimal damage and a no-confidence vote by the board of directors failed abysmally. He is the great-nephew of Bryant Vandegrift, which seems to be a relationship close enough to maintain a sense of tradition but distant enough to avoid charges of a family stranglehold on the company.

Jeanine Kunze

Known within Magadon as "The Iron Bitch," Jeanine Kunze is the current head of Internal Review. This department of the Administration Division is charged with maintaining corporate standards on all levels, from quality control to proper décor in break rooms. Kunze, who holds degrees from Yale in both Corporate Law and Economics, is a hands-on type of manager, preferring to personally oversee as many internal audits as her schedule permits. Kunze is a petite dark-haired thirty-something woman of average appearance. When she's in the field, she is often accompanied by a cutthroat group of Internal Review accountants and scientists. She encourages her subordinates to "dress for intimidation," believing that a strong, merciless front assists her department in ferreting out policy violations. This image has earned Internal Review personnel the nickname of "Terminators," which most of the department's employees relish.

Matthew Daviess

Another co-founder of Magadon, Daviess served on the company's board of directors until the Pentex takeover in 1959. He also worked as the Director of Administration for most of that time. When Pentex bought out Magadon,

Daviess was the most vocal objector. However, he was offered a generous (astronomical by most standards) retirement package and decided to accept it rather than continue fighting. Daviess dropped out of the public eye after retiring and reportedly died of a stroke in 1974.

Under the Tasty Candy Coating

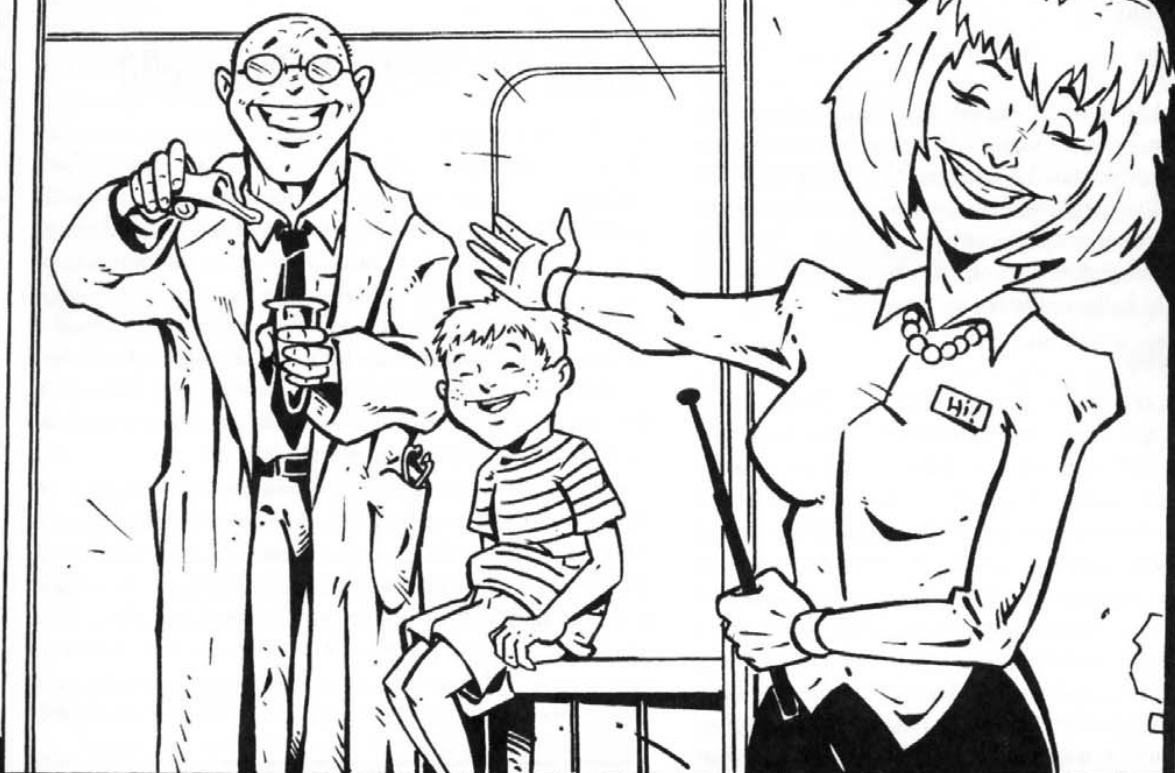
Magadon's corporate structure is designed for more than micromanagement. The company's founder was ex-military, and he understood the value of "plausible deniability." With the compartmentalized organizational scheme that Magadon operates under, any unsavory projects that do fall into public awareness are written off as "rogue" and the credibility of the corporation as a whole remains relatively undamaged. Also, because information exchange is kept to a minimum between divisions, it's that much harder for any interested parties — such as nosy werewolves — to find out what Magadon's *really* up to.

Contrary to some expectations, the vast majority of Magadon products and projects are completely benign and untainted. Although the corporation is ultimately a tool of the Wyrms, it needs to make a great deal of money, and that's best accomplished by working within the rigid guidelines that many national governments place on health care products and services. Magadon looks perfectly respectable because 99% of its work is perfectly respectable. It's that remaining

Damn, that's nasty!

Many of the Magadon projects detailed here have the potential to completely destroy entire aspects of the World of Darkness — including wiping out the Garou as a species. At first glance, this makes the situation seem utterly hopeless for Gaia's defenders — how can they fight something that keeps their cubs from ever realizing their true nature, or get every single bottle of a particular brand of pain reliever off every drugstore and supermarket shelf in the world? The threats seem insurmountable.

That's what Magadon and Pentex would like the situation to be. However, the realities of the world — even the World of Darkness — ensure that such programs *can't* be implemented on a national or global level. Government, military, corporate, public, and supernatural scrutiny would be sure to detect any such large-scale move. Thus, most of the Magadon operations described in this section are confined to small areas. Perhaps a certain drug's "altered" form is only distributed on a rotating schedule in Miami, Vancouver, Guadalajara, London, and Osaka, while the rest of the world gets the normal, benign version. Though Magadon itself is global, most of its really dangerous operations occur on the local level. The individual projects are just small enough to be crippled or completely stopped by a small, determined group — player characters, for instance.



1%, however, that keeps savvy Garou up at night wondering what their Kinfolk are easing their headaches with.

Administration

Admin is a total systems failure waiting to happen. It's an anal-retentive nightmare, a spiderweb of red tape, a morass of triplicate forms. If everyone in Admin followed "correct" procedure, Magadon would grind to a halt within a year. Most of the productive work that comes out of Admin is generated by employees who know how to work *around* the system. This methodology is self-perpetuating, so there's no way that Admin will ever clean up its act — doing so would require a ground-up restructuring of the entire division.

One advantage of Admin's bureaucratic bloating is that savvy opponents of the company can often find gold mines of information in its offices and databases. MagNet is run by Admin-operated mainframes, and security on these is often loose or nonexistent. Admin is also notorious for skimping on office fixtures, including security systems. Too often, everyone in this division assumes that someone else is taking care of the important tasks. The aforementioned "data warehouses" really do exist, and, while the search may take several nights, anything Magadon has ever done can be found in hardcopy form if the investigating party knows where the right warehouse is.

Sales and Marketing

Even in the eyes of Pentex itself, Sales and Marketing is a completely legitimate Magadon division. After all, S&M is responsible for keeping the company's public image squeaky-clean. It can't afford to screw up, because it is constantly in full view of the public. No subliminal messages in television commercials. No false advertising. No questionable company mascots, like Circinus' Big Top Bob. Everything this division does looks perfectly acceptable.

In actuality, S&M is the most oily, devious division of Magadon. It's no less corrupt than any other — it just has to work a thousand times harder at *hiding* that corruption. And yet, that same corruption has to directly affect just about everyone who deals with the whole company, either directly or through such intermediaries as Omni Television or Vesuvius Publishing. Most of S&M's efforts are through no supernatural or biomedical trickery, but rather through good old-fashioned human treachery and double-talk. Every single piece of publicity material that comes out of Sales and Marketing, be it a billboard design or a college recruiter's speech, is rigorously scrutinized by teams of top-notch spin doctors and propagandists to pack the maximum possible loading into words and graphics, all while maintaining total deniability. S&M's operational philosophy can best be summed up as "if you don't actually *make* any promises, you

MagNet

The Magadon internal computer network, as long-time opponents of Pentex may suspect, is part of the latter megacorporation's ICS. However, MagNet should not be written off as "a tool of the Weaver and the Wyrms." It is a fully functioning medical information network in its own right, and the vast majority of the data that passes through it is completely legitimate — and vital to someone's health.

On the "legitimate business" side, MagNet serves several vital functions for Magadon. First, it's an inventory control system that continually tracks sales and issues automated orders to production facilities around the globe. This allows Magadon to operate with a very low overhead — supply is tailored to meet demand, so that just about everything that's made gets sold and the company doesn't take any losses from unsold drugs that wind up sitting in warehouses until their expiration dates. Second, the network is the primary means through which widely-scattered research facilities coordinate their efforts. Third, MagNet is the primary tool through which Admin keeps the far-flung company running "smoothly," tracking everything from payroll data to individual employee productivity reports. Finally, with the recent extension of MagNet terminals to all Magadon clients, the network assists physicians and pharmacists with patient care. This last function's most critical purpose is to issue warnings about possible chemical interactions. If a doctor orders one drug for a patient who's already on another one, and the two drugs are known (or suspected) to cause harmful interactions, MagNet responds with a warning when the patient's pharmacist attempts to fill the prescription. This system, which has only been in place for a year, has already been credited with saving dozens of lives, and Magadon has basked in the warm glow of good PR.

Of course, there is more to MagNet than meets the public eye. Administration's insatiable hunger for information ensures that every bit of data entered into a MagNet terminal finds its way to Admin's databases, and from there to eventual processing by automatic subroutines and human operators. Anything that indicates the possible presence of enemies of Pentex — such as a hospital report of an irregular "animal attack" — is forwarded to the Pentex ICS for further attention. MagNet also allows Magadon to analyze medical trends in any given geographical area, which lets the corporation tailor its covert operations to attract the least amount of attention. If the CDC is setting up a field study in Idaho, Magadon goes completely legitimate in that state for the duration of the investigation. If a small town in New England is experiencing a large number of birth defects, the corporation looks into sponsoring the creation of a neonatal care facility in the area — for both profit and research.

can't be held accountable for breaking them." Vampires wish they were this good at manipulating the masses.

One program that deserves special attention is the Media Crisis Team department. If any party (say, your pack) attempts to publicly humiliate the company, the members of an MCT will be the first Magadon representatives to respond. Every single MCT contains former Omni newscasters and investigative reporters who are expert at misdirecting attention and sloughing blame. This cross-pollination also ensures that the MCT staffers know someone in the media in just about every locale, even in the areas where Omni and Vesuvius don't have the market cornered. Unless the exposé is rapid and widespread, the resulting cover-up will be complete — and dirt will be swept under the rug with First Team assistance, if necessary. If the situation is appropriate, the "industry intervention" MCT will find a way to subtly place blame on Magadon's competitors while ostensibly defending them.

Gerontology

There's only so much misery you can inflict on the fragile elderly over and above the usual, but GerDiv manages to make the most of its limited potential. Many GerDiv products perform well under their label specs — who's going to notice if an 88-year-old patient's bones decay a little faster, or if she complains of more pain than she should be feeling under her current dosage? This division's greatest contribution to human suffering, however, appears in the nursing homes that it runs in conjunction with Autumn Health Management Systems. Many families dump their great-grandparents in such facilities and leave them to rot, save for the obligatory holiday visits. This is one of Magadon's greatest sources of human test subjects. Without outside attention to the patients, dozens of new chemical and supernatural substances' effects can be studied in controlled environments. Staffers at such facilities are adept at playing off incoherent reports of abuse as senile dementia, further clouding the issue and keeping the patients/subjects helplessly captive.

Pediatrics

While doing its fair share of spreading misery and taint, Pediatrics has to be very careful about what it does. While a health-care scandal involving adults would be bad enough, one involving children could possibly bring down the entire corporation. Therefore, most of Peds' work in service to the Wyrms has long-term rather than short-term effects. For example, many drugs produced by this division have chemical or supernatural components that produce low-level depressive effects in their subjects. This causes the young patient to form negative associations with medical care: "if doctors are good, why do the drugs they give me make me feel so bad?" Such reasoning carries on as the patient develops into a young adult who avoids medical care for minor ailments until they become too major to ignore. In turn, such avoidance eventually results in higher medical bills and, hopefully, more use of products from other Magadon divisions.

The juvenile depression treatment program for which Pediatrics collaborates with PsychDiv is the division's most threatening project, at least where the Garou are concerned. It's far too deeply-hidden for the shapeshifters and their Kinfolk to be aware of yet, though they're starting to see its effects. In the late 1980s, Pentex researchers began to make advances in their study of "lycanthropy." Improper metabolic use of serotonin (a neurochemical that controls aggressive behavior) in their subjects led the scientists to theorize that shapeshifting could be suppressed by sufficient dosages of antidepressants. Their first experiments along these lines were disastrous — the werewolf physiology is more than capable of filtering out such drugs with only minor behavioral effects. However, further research showed that, if the "werewolf genetic sequence" has not yet activated, serotonin reuptake inhibitors can keep it dormant indefinitely. In short, antidepressants administered to children in the 10-to-16 age range can prevent the First Change, and, if the dosage is maintained long enough, can suppress a lost cub's Garou nature permanently. The very behavior that lost cubs exhibit at the onset of puberty is that which is most likely to result in antidepressants or other mood-altering drugs being prescribed, and Magadon is encouraging such treatment in the hopes of reducing the number of new werewolves. The next decade will show the program's effectiveness.

Women's Medicine

FemMed is the only Magadon division whose director is completely unaware of the company's covert dedication to corruption. Dr. Julia Miller is an outspoken feminist author who'd fit very well into most Black Fury moots were it not for the unfortunate fact of her employment. Under her supervision, FemMed strives for "pharmaceuticals and medical techniques to further the empowerment of the female." How Miller rose to her current position without being corrupted or fired is something of a mystery; the most common theory among those who have two facts to rub together is that her frequent pro-female tirades on national talk shows draw attention away from other Magadon divisions that might not be run quite as "cleanly."

Despite Miller's best efforts, however, FemMed isn't immune to the Pentex view of "public service." This division runs a multinational network of women's clinics in conjunction with Public Health. While the drugs dispensed at these facilities are usually just what they're supposed to be, the psychological impact of the counseling that accompanies most treatments is somewhat less than beneficial.

Infectious Diseases

Infectious Diseases' work ethic is very sincere. After all, Pentex wants humanity to rely on it, not to die out entirely. Thus, ID really is trying to cure the common cold and develop a working HIV vaccine. However, the very nature of the division's work gives it a vast array of potential biological weapons to use should a large enough target group present itself. For every cure or vaccine that this division

puts out, it warehouses another sample of something microscopic and deadly — or passes its information and samples on to Special Projects for refinement.

Due to the widespread distribution of ID's vaccines, they are ideal vehicles for the spread of various tainted substances or effects on a global scale. This fact is not lost on Magadon and Pentex management, who occasionally order certain batches of vaccines to be "altered" before shipment.

Genetics

Much of GenDiv's work is a double-headed axe. On one hand, every breakthrough results in another potentially life-saving drug or treatment technique. On the other, each of those breakthroughs is also another gateway to suffering and death in the service of the Wyrms. However, as most nations are well aware of the dangers of genetic research, Magadon's less savory work in this department must be kept under just as tight a wrap as Special Projects' nerve gas production.

Some of GenDiv's "best" work has gone into ID's vaccination programs. Under the cover of vaccinations and booster shots, Magadon distributes genetically altering material that makes its recipients more susceptible to certain diseases — or even gives them an engineered strain of one or more ailments that's designed to respond more favorably to Magadon's products than to any other treatments. This has primarily seen use in nations with less-developed public health systems, simply because it's easier for Magadon to get in under bureaucratic radar in such areas.

One more subtle refinement of this technique that's currently in the final testing phases is "binary" illnesses. Certain population groups are infected with a dormant disease or a genetic alteration agent under the cover of inoculations, flu shots, water treatment, or some other valid widespread medical program (which is often completely effective in its advertised role). After a few months, or a few years, Magadon distributes an activator through similar means. The activator causes the dormant agent to become fully active. Once the symptoms of the newly-activated disease become apparent, Magadon and other Pentex affiliates step in to treat it.

Currently, GenDiv is in charge of Pentex efforts to isolate the genes that control shapeshifting. Depending on whose reports you believe, the program has met with anything from critical failure to blinding success. Those few Garou who suspect that such research is taking place are extremely concerned that the complete suppression of "the blood" might prove possible. If implemented on a wide-enough scale (especially by targeting Kinfolk communities), such a genetic alteration would make the current generation of cubs the last of Gaia's protectors — ever.

Nutritional Health

Under the banner of GHN, Nutritional Health is spreading its influence and products through middle-class America. Many NHDiv products, especially "athletic foods," are highly psychologically addictive (though never chemi-

Binary Weapons

The term "binary" is used in warfare to describe a weapon — either an explosive or a chemical agent — that comes in two "pieces." The two components are usually nontoxic, inert, and harmless when separate; only when they are combined in the correct proportions do they become dangerous. This makes it possible to transport large quantities of the substance in question in relative safety, so long as the two components aren't allowed to accidentally come together. Over the past few decades, Magadon has been experimenting with various chemical, biological, and supernatural substances in binary form. This has several advantages, the most prominent being that such unpleasant creations are much easier to transport and use without attracting attention from authorities — or from Garou.

cally, as such formulas wouldn't make it past FDA scrutiny), and the strong advertising programs for Lizard Leap and its associated edibles ensure that many young athletes are firmly in Magadon's grip before making it out of high school. The mix of flashy commercials, aggressive slogans, and half-correct "exercise tips" actually encourages athletes to engage in activities that overstress their bodies, which can only lead to more money in Magadon's accounts as these individuals receive sports medicine treatment for their injuries and then play harder to compensate for lost time.

In addition to the psychological addictions spawned by the sports drinks and high-energy bars, many of NHDiv's other products grant short-term wellness at the expense of long-term health. Users are fine as long as they regularly consume their vitamins, but if they stop taking them for a few months, their energy levels drop and they enter mild depression — which is best alleviated by regular exercise and resumed use of dietary supplements, of course. Individuals who manage to stay off NHDiv products for years often develop muscular or skeletal degenerative disorders, which most doctors diagnose as the effects of malnutrition or the legacies of old stress injuries.

GHN also manufactures a wide array of remedies for minor ailments that affect people's appearance and self-image, from acne to obesity. These treatments promise rapid results, and they do deliver — but at a price. Image-conscious individuals gladly utilize "appetite suppression" pills and "skin-clearing cream" and marvel at the swift changes they see in the mirror, seldom making the connection with new health problems that spring up later. A rapid acne cure may make the user more vulnerable to skin cancer; diet pills often cause ulcers or chronic flatulence. If that weren't enough, a very low number of such items also contain dormant Banes waiting to reshape the hapless consumer into a new fomor, with powers and taints that are ironic twists on the very condition that the victim was trying to alleviate in the first place.

On the professional sports front, Nutritional Health oversees Ymir Sports Entertainment, the backbone of the



EWV and other "extreme" sports. Ymir runs several "training camps" for its prize athletes, combining sports medicine and Wyrms-given boons in a bizarre regimen that pushes the envelope of human physical development. Highly addictive NHDiv-made steroid cocktails (with secondary effects of physical mutations and psychological imbalance) are standard dietary supplements at these facilities. Ymir also keeps an eye on its prize athletes, singling out the most adept and psychotic ones for later First Team recruitment.

Psychiatric Therapy

A mind is a terrible thing to waste, so PsychDiv makes sure that every mind that passes through its sphere of influence is used to best effect. Psychoactive drugs are notoriously unpredictable in their effects, and Magadon capitalizes on this phenomenon. The highest per dosage Bane infestation rate is in this division's products — it's still an incredibly low fraction of a percentage, but much more common than in, say, GerDiv arthritis medicine. Infested doses also frequently contain short-term memory inhibitors to make the affected patient forget such "trivial" responsibilities as keeping up with his medication schedule. This serves to heighten Magadon's deniability factor: if a known manic-depressive goes on a killing spree and his mood stabilizers *aren't* found in his system after the cops gun him down, the company can't be held responsible for its drugs not working. After all, the patient wasn't taking them when he committed his crimes.

The low-impact antidepressant program mentioned earlier is another method for creating mental patients in job lots. Magadon hopes to be able to market its "pick-me-ups" over the counter, making them accessible to anyone who feels the need for a mild, legal euphoric or stress-reliever. While the formulas are completely harmless in a biochemical sense, they are highly psychologically addictive. Repeated use has one of two effects. The first is that the user's body chemistry begins to adjust itself to filter out the low-impact drugs, necessitating the use of stronger (prescription) antidepressants. The second is that the user may begin to search for stronger euphorics, leading her to illegal drugs. Either Magadon gets more money or Pentex's ultimate goal is furthered. It's a win-win situation.

Consumer Products

This division produces the single widest array of products, and so has the greatest amount of opportunities to spread the Wyrms' work. Many of the "special programs" found later in this chapter are applied to CP's work. There's no single Bad Thing that CP does; its tainted products and programs are all over the ethical and supernatural map. Painkillers that don't kill pain, condoms with pinholes, bandages with loose adhesive, funny-smelling antiperspirant — and those are just a random sampling of the completely mundane things. The Storyteller is advised to use her imagination and leave the characters wary of using anything in their bathrooms.

Technologies and Applications

As with Consumer Products, Technologies and Applications has a wide variety of opportunities to spread chaos and despair. Many electronic devices produced by this division grow gradually less sensitive or accurate with time: scales may give higher and higher weights, blood pressure cuffs may show deceptively normal and safe readings, and so on. Less complex equipment tends to have less subtle (but no less noticeable) problems, such as syringes with inaccurate volume notations or surgical gloves with microscopic holes.

Public Health

The Public Health division is ostensibly involved in research to counter drug addiction. This, of course, requires that PubHealth laboratories have ready access to supplies of heroin, cocaine, LSD, and the whole illicit chemical buffet. These supplies are *huge* — much larger than government oversight agencies are aware of. Many "research" centers are located in countries without strict drug enforcement, and their work is a cover for processing and distribution of pure, uncut drugs. Even in the United States, security at the legitimate labs is painfully lax, and the facilities themselves are located in or near the worst neighborhoods in their home cities — which encourages convenient "break-ins." The DEA is starting to get suspicious, which is leading PubHealth to move many of its operations to Europe or Southwest Asia.

The Metcalf Clinics conglomerate, another joint Magadon-August venture, is the ultimate beneficiary of PubHealth's legitimate counter-addiction research. This chain has detox centers in several countries, and reports a success rate that's as high as those of its better-known competitors. On the inside, however, Metcalf Clinics are much the same as GerDiv-financed nursing homes: controlled environments in which Magadon can administer involuntary drug testing to its corporate heart's content.

Veterinary Health

VetDiv was recently restructured around the core of Aesop Research Company, a product testing corporation absorbed by Magadon in 1996. The rearrangement of divisional assets and management has radically shifted the focus of Veterinary Health's work. Prior to the Aesop takeover, VetDiv concentrated on household veterinary medicine: pet health and wellness. Food and labor animals were a secondary focus. Within the past year, most of VetDiv's research assets have been shifted to animal experimentation, testing other divisions' new drug formulas on laboratory animals. Existing products are still coming out of the factories, but no new ones are in development. This is a source of considerable friction with the Veterinary Health employees who were in the division prior to the restructuring, and the division loses researchers on a weekly basis as they migrate to other corporations whose programs are more "humane." VetDiv management has taken note of this exodus, and many former Aesop employees have been

directed to suspend or tone down their testing programs in the hope that a lessening of perceived offenses will mitigate the ill will that the restructuring has caused in the division.

One noteworthy VetDiv-backed program that survived the Aesop merger is the Endangered Predators Preservation Foundation. Operating in loose conjunction with other endangered species preservation groups, this nonprofit organization is concerned with expanding the population of endangered predator species by relocating breeding pairs to isolated wilderness areas that human expansion (and human hunting) is unlikely to touch in the near future. The EPPF is financed through so many layers of laundering that only the most determined and expert efforts could trace its control back to Magadon (thus its profile appears here, rather than in the "public knowledge" section). Most shapeshifters who are aware of the EPPF approve of it, as it represents one more hope for their respective Kin — especially the nearly-depopulated large cats that the Bastet claim as cousins. In actuality, Pentex is fully aware of the shapeshifters' connection to various predator species, and the EPPF's relocation programs allow the corporation to place suspected breeding stock in areas that are easy to keep under surveillance. Several Garou, a handful of Bastet, and one Gurahl have been killed or captured by First Teams while attempting to find mates in EPPF-sponsored relocation areas.

Special Projects

Special Projects is the Magadon division with the least public recognition — almost none, thanks to Sales and Marketing's masterful job of covering up its last accidental chemical spill in 1993. SP's specialty is chemical and biological warfare, and its customers are not hospitals or consumers but governments. This division's single largest customer is the United States Army, which has been diverting billions of dollars of funds into biological and chemical weapons research for much longer than the average citizen would like to think. SP happily soaks up this torrent of pre-laundered cash, letting the United States handle research costs and then covertly selling the fruits of that labor across the globe. Special Projects has no *known* links to hostile governments or terrorist groups, but it is known to employ several dozen former intelligence agents as "field technical consultants." This is the only Magadon division with its own sales staff, operating completely apart from the S&M division. Such compartmentalization serves to heighten Magadon's ability to deny affiliation with SP should its unsavory activities come to light.

As might be suspected, Special Projects does indeed supply Pentex First Teams with chemical and biological agents specifically tailored to affect shapeshifters. SP quietly appropriates the research of other Magadon divisions, particularly Genetics, Infectious Diseases and Veterinary Products, for use in its anti-werewolf weapons programs. The limiting factor in advancing these projects is the shortage of live test subjects.

People to Watch Bryant Vandegrift

Vandegrift was indeed an Army doctor through World War II; this can easily be confirmed by any character with access to Army personnel records. He did head Magadon until he retired a few years after the Pentex takeover. However, suspicious characters will note that there's no record of him anywhere after his retirement in 1961. This may lead to some interesting conspiracy theories, and indeed has within Magadon — the popular corporate myth is that Vandegrift is still alive and controlling the company through his secret influence over (or his secret identity as) one or more members of the board of directors. During his tenure, he was noted for his ruthless intolerance for incompetence (he personally toured Magadon facilities without warning, sacking entire project teams who couldn't answer his questions immediately) and cutthroat business sense.

In truth, Vandegrift is still around, though he prefers to exert his influence over the company only when it furthers his current pet projects. After his retirement, he assumed several new identities—including those of "Seth MacCartt," a Magadon quality control inspector, and "Dr. Theodore Eatherly," the current Director of Infectious Diseases. He's a researcher, not a bureaucrat, and is happiest when he's working on eight different projects at once.

Vandegrift is of medium height and build, with brown hair and eyes and a neatly-trimmed goatee. He appears to be in his mid-forties; as with most of the Magadon founders, he's been taking regular doses of Anagath F45.6 for decades. Vandegrift's precise capabilities are left to the Storyteller's discretion. He is human, and isn't known to be hosting any Banes, but he knows *everything* that Magadon is up to and may have benefited from a variety of drugs, genetic treatments, and/or more supernatural boons. He is a first-rate medical theoretician (Intelligence 5, with Medicine [virology] and Science [microbiology] at 6 each) and likes to micromanage projects that catch his attention. The Storyteller is advised to use Vandegrift as Magadon's "secret master," dispensing orders and advice as the whim strikes him.

Anderson Mertz

Mertz, a New Mexico native, is Black Spiral Kin. Immediately after his retirement from the Army, he went home to visit the family and was given a task to perform: get a fetish from the Trinity Hive, one containing a powerful sleeping Bane, close enough to Vandegrift for the spirit to turn him to the Wyrms' service. Mertz accomplished his mission, though Vandegrift's moral and spiritual corruption was a matter of degrees and years. The fetish is still in Vandegrift's possession, though he's never figured out that the small obsidian sculpture in his office is anything more than a Navajo good luck charm.

Mertz, though "only" Kinfolk, is a spiritualist of no small power. He's responsible for the development of several

of Magadon's Bane-related projects, including umbrophrenol-6. He is also still alive and active, as may be assumed from the use of the present tense in referring to him. His "death" in 1963 was a staged incident designed to draw suspicion away from his lack of aging. Currently, Mertz is Magadon's Director of Special Projects. He still uses his real name, as Special Projects isn't publicly recognized anyway.

James Graystone

Graystone's succession to the CEOship of Magadon was completely legitimate, a rare thing in a company where "cutthroat competition" is often literal. Though some board members felt he'd be a puppet, Graystone quickly established himself as an independent, charismatic CEO, thanks in part to his great-uncle's extensive blackmail files on the executives in question. He is less a mouthpiece for Vandegrift than he is a protégé, though only a handful of individuals are aware of the existence of the relationship, let alone its true nature.

Prior to working with Magadon, Graystone was employed by the British Ministry of Intelligence, where he was involved in a series of experiments in brainwashing and reprogramming. He has applied these techniques to his leadership style, and fancies himself something of a psychological aikido master: he allows his opponents' personality flaws to work for him, guiding them into self-incrimination and failure.

As Magadon's CEO, Graystone has access to an enormous amount of both Magadon and Pentex resources, in addition to his mentor's total knowledge of the company's agendas. He has two First Teams (Team 41, "The Chalk Outliners," and Team 72, "The Rib Spreaders") assigned as his personal troubleshooters and bodyguards. His personal power is rather limited in a physical sense, but one touch of a speed-dial button and he can move the world.

Jeanine Kunze

Kunze's moniker of "The Iron Bitch" is more apt than the terrified pharmacologist who coined it realized. Kunze is a former Shadow Lord Ahroun who disappeared from Berlin in late 1989. When she resurfaced in 1992, she had walked the Black Spiral and was wholeheartedly a servant of the Wyrms, having taken Hakaken as her personal totem. Internal Review, her pet project since 1994, is the Magadon department responsible for enforcing internal security. This involves hunting down and plugging security leaks, usually with the bodies of the family of those responsible for the leaks.

Kunze's Terminators are, for the most part, normal humans; they simply like having a great deal of leverage over their fellow Magadon employees. Many are accountants, pharmacologists, and other professionals whose jobs wouldn't normally be considered all that intimidating, and they're fanatically grateful to Kunze for raising them from the depths of geekiness. Her own personal staff, First Team 64 ("Red Tape Garrotes"), is composed of a Glass Walker-turned-Black Spiral management specialist, two Ferectoi accountants, and a telepathic interrogator from Project Odyssey.

Matthew Daviess

Matthew Daviess, code-named Orestes by Pentex security, is Magadon's worst nightmare. A former Army doctor who put "Army" before "doctor," he was one of the company's most critical personnel from its inception until the Pentex takeover. Somehow, Daviess managed to uncover a large portion of the truth about Pentex and used this information to delay the buyout for the better part of a year by playing political and financial games with Pentex's Acquisitions Division. When he began losing this campaign, he changed tactics, threatening to go public with all of the information he had that would be believable. Pentex first attempted to buy his silence; when that failed, a First Team was sent to ensure his cooperation. Daviess learned of the incipient attack and escaped, leaving a booby-trapped canister of a corrosive VX variant in his laboratory.

Since 1959, Daviess has been carrying on a one-man war against Pentex, with Magadon as his preferred target. He's attempted to assassinate Vandegrift four times (once hospitalizing him for a year and a half with a bullet through both lungs), saved two packs of Monkeywrenchers and passed information to a dozen more, and sabotaged countless production facilities and administrative complexes. Magadon security knows him as a delusional animal rights activist with right-wing militia group ties and has standing orders to shoot him on sight.

Daviess, like Vandegrift, was given a variety of advanced treatments before his departure from the company. He's managed to steal a supply of Anagath F45.6 that will keep his body akin to that of a 28-year-old for at least two more decades. Physically, he's a match for many Ahroun in Crinos. Mentally, he's a master of guerrilla warfare and one of the world's foremost toxicologists. He knows everything worth knowing about Magadon and a good deal about Pentex. If he has a weakness, it's his monomania. After 40 years of fighting the Wyrms, Daviess doesn't remember why he started. He's paranoid as hell and doesn't give a damn about collateral damage as long as his target goes down. Storytellers may use Daviess as a "guardian angel," supplying timely assistance to packs who've gotten themselves in too deep. They may also use him as an object lesson on what happens to people who fight the Wyrms too long without outside influences to keep them focused on what they're really fighting for.

The Magadon Manual of Modern Pharmaceuticals

Between all of its products, including those that aren't strictly pharmaceutical, Magadon manufactures over 1000 different chemical substances and other items. Cataloguing each and every one of those would take up more space than this book has. This section is an overview of the drugs and other chemicals that player characters are most likely to encounter, either as users or as victims.



Effects describes the mechanical and roleplaying effects of the substance in question. Some drugs are mentioned as inflicting "[bashing] damage"; this is for those Storytellers who've chosen to fool around with Revised rules (available on our website or by tinkering with **Vampire Revised**). Everyone else, just be aware that damage marked as such optionally heals faster (for mortals) than would a gun wound or the like.

Form is the form in which the substance is most commonly found: orally taken solid (pill or capsule), injected liquid, and so on.

Availability describes the ease or difficulty with which the substance may be acquired.

Resist Toxin tells how the substance is affected by the most common Garou Gift that deals with foreign substances. Unless otherwise noted, other Gifts such as Adaptation and Survivor act in the same manner as Resist Toxin.

Medicinal Drugs

Pain Relievers

This is a catch-all classification for a large number of commercially-available and prescription drugs designed to relieve mild to moderately severe levels of pain. The most common low-level pain relievers are ibuprofen, acetami-

nophen, and aspirin; the best-known mid-range is codeine. Mild pain relievers work by reducing the buildup of chemicals associated with pain and inflammation. Stronger ones have various neurological and physical effects depending on their chemical composition.

Effects: Light pain relievers remove the dice pool penalty for the Hurt health level. They have no game effect on more severe forms of injury, but may have roleplaying effects at the Storyteller's discretion. Stronger prescription pain relievers reduce dice pool penalties for wounds by two, but decrease the subject's Perception and Wits by one dot each while they are in his system. The strongest legal pain relievers are only given to hospitalized patients who aren't expected to be moving for a while. These remove all dice pool penalties from injuries and pain, but reduce the subject's Dexterity and Mental Attributes by two dots each.

Form: Light pain relievers are almost always solid tablets or capsules; stronger ones are found in solid or liquid (oral or injected) forms.

Availability: Light pain relievers can be obtained anywhere that over-the-counter drugs are sold, for nominal cost (Resources •). Stronger ones are legally available under doctor's orders only, but are easy to find on the street.

Resist Toxin: No effect, as pain relievers cause no damage and are not recognized by the spirits as threatening.

Anesthetics (local)

More specific than pain relievers, local anesthetics act by blocking the transmission of all sensory impulses from the affected area to the brain. This prevents the patient from feeling any pain from an injury, but also keeps her from feeling pressure or temperature — the only way she can tell what's happening to that part of her body is to look.

Effects: The effects of a local anesthetic are up to the Storyteller's discretion, but the suggested benefit is the removal of all dice pool penalties from one specific wound (bullet in the thigh, shattered forearm), which will generally be a 1-3-die penalty that's eliminated. However, the character is at half his normal Dexterity (round down) when using the affected body part — it's hard to shoot or drive when your hand feels like a chunk of warm meat on the end of your arm.

Form: Manufactured local anesthetics are almost always injected liquid. Very rarely (mostly in dental applications or local herbal remedies) they're a paste that's smeared on the appropriate area.

Availability: Local anesthetics are used for specific medical procedures and are only legally available through a doctor. They can be found on the street with moderate ease: it's not that it's hard to get them, but there's not much demand.

Resist Toxin: No effect, unless the character consciously uses the Gift to neutralize the anesthetic; this requires three turns to take effect.

Decongestants/Antihistamines

These substances relieve the symptoms of minor allergies and other respiratory discomfort. They suppress the body's reaction to foreign matter such as pollen and restrict blood flow into the sinuses, thus preventing the secretion of mucus and internal swelling that leads to congestion.

Effects: Decongestants have no effect on werewolves, as the Garou immune system prevents allergic reactions from any trivial substances (though it does not block allergic reactions that cause actual damage). However, Kinfolk and other humans may use decongestants to relieve the effects of the Flaw: Allergy, if the allergy is to an inhaled or airborne substance. At the Storyteller's discretion, human characters may experience drowsiness.

Form: Usually solid tablets or capsules, though liquid nasal sprays are also common.

Availability: Anywhere that over-the-counter drugs are sold, for nominal cost (Resources •).

Resist Toxin: No additional effects. The shapeshifter metabolism prevents any negative side-effects such as sleepiness.

Antidepressants

There's a certain social stigma attached to the use of antidepressants in some cultures, who feel that it's bad form to admit that you can't control your emotions without chemical help. However, in the past decade, these drugs have become more commonly known — thanks in part to

Magadon's aggressive marketing and pro-acceptance campaigns for Penzac and its generic equivalents. Antidepressants take various chemical routes to making their user more upbeat and less aggressive. The most common, SRIs (Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors), work by controlling the brain's ability to utilize serotonin, a neurotransmitter that suppresses the "fight" portion of the fight-flight behavior set.

Effects: The effects of antidepressants on humans are mainly roleplaying-based; they may cause a change of Demeanor (though not Nature) and can suppress various Mental and Psychological Flaws at the Storyteller's discretion.

On Garou, however, antidepressants have a different effect. They do not cause behavioral or personality changes, but instead affect the subject's Rage. A werewolf who takes regular doses of antidepressants has his maximum Rage reduced by 1 after one week of use. After a full month of use, Rage drops by 2. While the character is on antidepressants, the player may not spend experience to raise Rage. If the character goes off the drugs, his lost Rage returns after three days, and he gains an extra point of Rage for the next week, after which his Rage returns to its normal value. While the character has this extra Rage, all rolls for frenzy are made at -1 difficulty. These modifiers cannot lower the character's Rage below 1 or raise it above 10.

The effects of antidepressants on Garou who have not yet Changed are particularly unpleasant, and the werewolves are only beginning to realize how many lost cubs may be permanently lost to them. While an unChanged shapeshifter is on antidepressants, he will not undergo the Change except in the most extreme of circumstances (Storyteller's discretion). If he remains on antidepressants through his entire young adulthood (from puberty to age 20 or so), his Rage is permanently lost to him and he may never Change. He is considered Garou for genetic purposes, and is not subject to the Delirium, but he will never be fully Garou.

Antidepressants affect the brain's chemical balance, and they can have various side effects. The most common ones include sleep deprivation, heightened physical sensitivity, and nervousness. They may have more unsettling side effects on Garou (or other users) at the Storyteller's discretion.

Form: Almost always a solid pill, capsule, or tablet.

Availability: Antidepressants are prescription drugs, though they can be found on the street with sufficient funding and savvy.

Resist Toxin: The character loses no Rage from long-term antidepressant use and is not subject to side effects, but is constantly down one temporary point of Gnosis due to the Gift's constant low-level activity. This does not serve to counter other toxins; the Gift must be fully activated to deal with those, at the normal Gnosis cost.

Stimulants

Stimulants work chemically in various ways. Physiologically, they dispel fatigue and marginally heighten senses. However, their effects on the nervous system tend to give

the user too much nervous energy: his fingers tremble slightly and he is unable to sit still. In large doses, they can induce insomnia or diarrhea. This entry covers commercially available stimulants that most governments deem safe; stronger ones are given in individual entries below.

Effects: The character's Stamina is raised by one for the purpose of staying awake or resisting mild depressants or sedatives. However, her Dexterity is decreased by one for the purpose of fine manipulation (surgery or lock picking). Gross motor skills (including those used in combat) are unaffected.

Form: Several stimulants are available in over-the-counter pill forms. Some soft drinks and coffee brands boast enhanced caffeine levels that achieve much the same effect. Many tribal cultures have discovered equivalents, frequently these are chewed leaves.

Availability: Damn near everywhere.

Resist Toxin: If the character consciously activates the Gift to nullify the stimulant, the Dexterity penalty is eliminated.

Sedatives (depressants)

A variety of substances act as sedatives, though their mechanical effects are the same for game purposes. In general, sedatives block the release of the neurochemicals that cause anxiety and other related emotions and interfere with the transmission of certain nerve impulses. In low doses, sedatives calm the recipient and induce a sense of peace (and sometimes mild euphoria). In higher doses, they induce sleep. Although they are often used for medicinal purposes, most often to control seizures and to keep surgical patients calm, they are heavily abused on the street and in high society due to their euphoric effects. Overdoses of sedatives can cause brain damage, coma, or death, especially when the user is also drinking alcohol.

Effects: Low doses halve the character's Wits, reduce shapeshifters' Rage by one, and increase Willpower by one for purposes of determining Delirium reactions. Moderate doses halve all Mental Attributes, reduce Rage by two, and increase Willpower by two for Delirium response. High doses cause unconsciousness: the player must succeed in a Stamina roll (difficulty 8; shapeshifters add half their Rage to this roll) or the character falls asleep within (Stamina - 2) minutes. What consists of a "low," "moderate," or "high" dose is left to the Storyteller's discretion.

An overdose of sedatives (more than twice the amount needed to knock a character unconscious; Storytellers are advised to use this for botches on Medicine rolls or multiple injections by Delirium-crazed doctors) lowers a randomly-determined Mental Attribute by one point if the player fails a Stamina roll (difficulty 7).

Form: Mild sedatives are usually in pill form. Stronger ones are almost always injected liquids or inhaled gases.

Availability: Mild sedatives are prescribed; stronger ones aren't (legally) used outside of directly supervised

medical treatment. They're all available on the street; expense and difficulty of acquisition rise with potency.

Resist Toxin: All effects are countered with use of this Gift.

Antibiotics

A wide variety of antibiotics exists today, from broad-spectrum ones used as preventive measures to those which are used to treat one specific type of bacterium. Most antibiotics work on the same basic principle: they interfere with the ability of bacteria to reproduce, or kill them outright, by breaking down bacterial cell walls. Many antibiotics can cause allergic reactions if misused, or can cause

Tranq'n'Grab

Fast-acting tranquilizers are a subset of sedatives. They're primarily used in animal research to restrain experimental subjects, though some formulas are intended for hospital use on human patients who need to be restrained for their own safety and that of their doctors. These are the sedatives that player characters are most likely to encounter in a hostile situation.

Effects: A fast-acting tranquilizer has a "stun rating" between 1 and 30 (this is not a real world term, but a game mechanic that represents a lot of painfully complex chemistry). A low stun rating represents something used on lab animals; a high one might be something intended for elephants. When a character is injected with a tranq, the Storyteller rolls the chemical's stun rating and the player rolls the character's Stamina (both difficulty 6; shapeshifters add half their Rage to Stamina). If the character has an equal or greater number of successes, the shot has no effect. If the tranq has more successes, the character receives one illusory "health level" of damage every (Stamina) turns. This is not actual damage — it represents the gradual loss of muscle control and consciousness that the victim undergoes. However, it can't be soaked, as this gradual "damage" is a representation of the chemical's unresisted effect (the earlier Stamina roll determined the character's ability to resist it). This "damage" wears off at the rate of one "health level" per hour.

If a character is tranquilized too heavily, he may suffer permanent neurological damage. Every three "health levels" past Incapacitated translate into one level of actual (lethal) damage. Note that a shapeshifter who's knocked unconscious reverts to breed form, so this damage won't be regenerated until the character wakes up... if he wakes up.

Form: Injected liquid.

Availability: Legal to animal handling specialists (game wardens, zookeepers) and medical personnel. Street acquisition is possible, but iffy due to low demand and thus low supply.

Resist Toxin: The tranquilizer is negated completely.

"You feel a strange stabbing sensation . . ."

Drugs and poisons can be delivered in a variety of manners. Here are some of the ways player characters may employ — or encounter — the substances described in this section.

Poison ring: The infamous "poison ring" of the arsenic-using Borgias (and Shadow Lords) was not, contrary to some legends, a primitive hypodermic needle. Rather, it was a jeweled signet ring with a cunningly concealed compartment. This was used to carry a small amount of poison in powder form that was dumped into a victim's drink. Reproductions of such rings are now fashionable accessories in some circles, where they're most often used to conceal the wearer's supply of recreational drugs. Using one for its original purpose requires a *Dexterity + Streetwise* roll (difficulty of the victim's *Perception + Alertness*).

Syringe: This typical piece of medical equipment should need little explanation. It's wise to carry one with its safety cap on to avoid being stabbed accidentally. Using a syringe in close combat requires one action to prepare it, then a second action to attack and a *Dexterity + Melee* or *Dexterity + Medicine* roll (difficulty 6; you're either using it like a weapon or aiming for places where the drug will have the fastest effect). If the attacker only scores one success on the attack roll, he has successfully stabbed but didn't have a chance to inject — the syringe is left sticking out of the victim. A syringe is fairly fragile and is destroyed by any successful parry attempt.

Concealed syringe: Some companies market syringe pens for discreet use by diabetics who must take insulin injections daily. These are indistinguishable from ordinary ball-point pens on casual examination. A sufficiently skilled chemist with access to the proper materials could conceivably refill one with another substance.

Autoinjector: Autoinjectors are spring-loaded, impact-activated syringes intended for military self-medication. As manufactured, they contain morphine (for field first aid) or atropine (for response to nerve gas attacks). An autoinjector is a tube about the size of a highway flare with a rubber membrane on one end and a simple mechanical safety. To use an autoinjector, the affected individual takes one action to arm it and slam it into his thigh; the mechanism does the rest. If a character attempts to use an autoinjector on an unwilling subject, treat it as an attack with a syringe, but even one success on the attack roll activates the autoinjector.

Dart guns: Available in both pistol and rifle forms, these weapons fire darts by means of compressed air. They're most often used to fire tranquilizers at animals, though some First Teams and other individuals use darts with other substances in them. Both types of dart guns hold one shot and fire at a difficulty of 7, and are effectively silent except for a faint "phoot." A pistol has a range of 10 yards and can be concealed under a jacket. A rifle has a range of 30 yards and cannot be concealed.

dangerous reactions with other drugs. They also have a wide variety of potential side effects, ranging from nausea to impaired vision to seizures to liver failure (though the latter are extreme and rare).

Effects: Broad-spectrum antibiotics add one to the character's *Stamina* for the purposes of resisting all bacterial infections. Specific antibiotics add three points of *Stamina* for resisting a specific type of bacterial infection (sinus, urinary tract, etc.). If applied to an open wound within an hour of its infliction, the chances of infection are greatly reduced (Storyteller's discretion, but such unpleasantness as gangrene is much less likely to set in — and this should be of particular importance for unhealed aggravated wounds such as those inflicted by unwashed Black Spiral claws). Note that antibiotics do not help at all against viral infections, only bacterial ones.

Allergic reactions cause one to eight health levels of [lethal] damage, inflicted over one to twelve hours. This should be used for dramatic effect, not to kill player characters. Most adults in developed countries know if they're allergic to specific antibiotics (such as penicillin derivatives or sulfa drugs), and many who are wear a small medical information tag that carries such information.

Form: Solid pills are the most common, followed by injected liquids. Some of the first widely-used antibiotics were powders that were sprinkled on open wounds, and these are still in use by many military forces as first aid measures for troops who may not have a hospital immediately available to them.

Availability: These are usually prescribed in developed nations, and rarely found on the street due to low demand. The black market availability of antibiotics actually goes up in places without public health — there's not much profit in selling these in Los Angeles, but South American villagers who've never seen a hospital are a lot more willing to meet a seller's price.

Resist Toxin: No effect, unless the character specifically activates the Gift to neutralize the antibiotic's effect, in which case it's fully nullified. Garou do not suffer from antibiotic side effects thanks to their supernatural metabolism.

Chemical Weapons

Chemical weapons are chemicals that are specifically intended to incapacitate, injure, or kill human targets on a large scale. Each substance listed in this category has one

DMSO

Dimethyl Sulfoxide (DMSO) is a nonreactive chemical that's infamous for being mixed with LSD and used to swab the door handles of cop cars in the 1960s and 70s. DMSO is a liquid that forces the skin to absorb whatever's on it (dirt) or in liquid solution with the DMSO (drugs or toxins).

additional entry: **Protection.** This describes the measures that can be taken to prevent exposure to the chemical.

Pepper Spray

This is not a chemical weapon in the military sense of the word, but many civilians and police officers use it for non-lethal self defense. Pepper spray is also known as oleoresin capsicum; it's a concentrated natural substance that's extracted from chili peppers. It acts by irritating the eyes and sinuses, resulting in impaired vision and breathing within moments of contact, as well as intense pain in the affected areas. This incapacitation theoretically allows the user to escape or to subdue the affected individual.

Effects: Pepper spray is usually fired from a small pressurized canister. The user must succeed in a Dexterity + Firearms or Dexterity + Melee roll ("chemical spray" is a valid specialty for both skills). Once the victim is hit, her Perception drops to 1 for purposes of vision and to 0 for scent

and taste. She is down four dice on all rolls that rely on sight (including attack rolls in combat) and endurance, and down two dice on all others. These penalties are halved after (10 - [2 x Stamina]) minutes and disappear entirely after another (30 - [2 x Stamina]) minutes.

If the character is using Heightened Senses or is in Lupus form when she is hit, the penalties and effect duration are doubled.

At the Storyteller's discretion (best used for a dramatic effect), humans with low Stamina may experience potentially fatal allergic reactions to pepper spray. Treat such a situation as if the victim has been exposed to a blood agent (see below), or use whatever narrative method seems most appropriate.

Form: Pepper spray is a red-orange liquid that's usually dispersed with a pressurized air spray.

Availability: Canisters of pepper spray can be found in most hardware stores, department stores, or gun shops for less than \$20. Pepper spray is legal to carry, and is both legally and socially acceptable for self defense.

Resist Toxin: This Gift has no effect on pepper spray, as the compound is completely organic and non-toxic to Garou.

Protection: The best defense against this substance is not to get hit with the spray. Barring that, a gas mask (or a wet cloth tied over the mouth and nose and a pair of swimming goggles) provides full protection.



Fwoosh!

Pepper spray and tear gas are the chemical “weapons” that are most commonly employed, and thus those most likely to be encountered or used by player characters. Here’s some information on the usual devices used to dispense these substances. Note that Pentex (and other agencies who are noted for lack of concern for human life, such as terrorist groups) may employ variations of these devices with more lethal substances. Storytellers are advised to use common sense: a pepper spray canister full of VX would be ludicrous, but a gas grenade containing phosgene wouldn’t be out of the question for a First Team.

Pepper spray canister: This is the standard pepper spray device that’s commonly sold to civilians and police. It’s a palm-sized cylinder with a flip-up safety cap over a thumb trigger. Difficulty 7, Range 3, Rate 1, “Clip” 3, Concealment P (actually, it’s easy to palm one and hide it in your hand in dim light). Effects are as per the standard pepper spray rules. Similar devices (identical Traits) are also used for tear gas; they’re legal for law enforcement use only.

Bear mace canister: A larger container of pepper spray with a slightly higher concentration of the active ingredient, this is found in camping supply stores near wilderness areas. It’s intended for use against bears and other large predators. Difficulty 6, Range 6, Rate 1, “Clip” 10, Concealment P. Effects are as per the pepper spray rules. Devices of this size are almost never sold in cities. These traits can also be applied to the personal tear gas canisters that some police forces still issue in lieu of pepper spray, with the effects adjusted for the appropriate chemical.

Riot control sprayer: Resembling nothing so much as a household fire extinguisher, this is a semi-portable device used by prison guards and police to subdue rioters. It’s usually filled with one of the tear gas variants rather than pepper spray. The wielder of such an implement makes no attack roll when firing — instead, a roughly conical area extending 10 yards downrange is saturated with the substance, and everyone within it must succeed in a Dexterity + Dodge roll (difficulty 8) or suffer the effects. Users should wear gas masks, as there’s no guarantee that the cloud won’t blow right back at them. A sprayer can fire once per turn, and holds 12 shots. Effects are as per the tear gas rules. These aren’t too common in the United States outside of prison armories; most American riot cops prefer to use tear gas grenades to keep rioters at arm’s length, rather than closing to the range that a sprayer requires.

Tear gas grenade (thrown): This is a cylinder about the size of a shortened aerosol can, capped with a fusing mechanism with the typical pin and handle arrangement common to all modern grenades. When the handle is released, the chemical process that releases the gas begins and the grenade begins emitting tear gas at the end of the next turn. The reaction that activates the gas and expels it generates quite a bit of heat, enough that flammable items may be ignited if the grenade lands on them. Anyone attempting to pick the grenade up (for example, a character in the crowd that’s just been gassed) takes two health levels of aggravated damage (difficulty 6 to soak) and will have hand burns that will make him readily identifiable if he’s arrested later. A tear gas grenade generates a cloud with a 10-yard radius in still air.

Tear gas grenade (launched): This is a standard gas round for a grenade launcher. It’s about the same size as a tear gas grenade, but can only be activated through being damaged catastrophically or by being fired as intended. Many such grenades have their emission holes placed so the gas is expelled under high pressure, causing the round to jiggle around on the ground; anyone trying to pick it up must succeed in a Dexterity roll (difficulty 8) and is still subject to the same heat hazard as a thrown gas grenade. If someone is directly hit with a launched grenade, he takes five dice of [bashing] damage.

“Barricade Buster” shotgun round: Launched grenades move at a low enough velocity that, while they’ll go through window glass, they won’t penetrate doors or wallboard. This specialized 12 gauge round has found limited use among SWAT teams as a means of breaking standoffs in situations involving barricaded suspects. It’s a shotgun shell-sized tear gas grenade capped with a metal penetrator that will punch through reinforced safety glass, up to two inches of wood, or a car door, then expel its gaseous payload on the far side of the barrier. The volume of gas generated is rather small (enough to fill one average-sized classroom or living room), but that’s all that’s needed in many such situations. A character who’s directly shot with such a round takes eight dice of [bashing] damage. Due to the size and shape of a barricade buster round, it won’t feed properly in a semiautomatic shotgun — only pump-action or break-open weapons can chamber one. Additionally, it has lousy ballistic properties: divide the shotgun’s normal range by 5 when firing one of these.

Tear Gas

This category includes various chemical compounds (CS, CN, CR) that are, like pepper spray, intended for non-lethal incapacitation of aggressors. Tear gas is commonly used by police in crowd control, hostage rescue, and barricade situations. Like pepper spray, it acts by inflaming the eyes and sinuses, impairing vision and breathing. Unlike pepper spray, tear gas also causes skin irritation, dizziness, incapacitating coughing, and nausea.

Effect: Tear gas takes effect on the turn after initial exposure. The victim is down three dice on all rolls related to vision or endurance and two dice on most other rolls (exemptions at the Storyteller's discretion). If exposure lasts longer than one minute (20 turns or so, much longer than most combats last), the player must roll Stamina (difficulty 6); failure indicates that the character has been overcome with nausea and can take no actions other than retching and crawling without succeeding in a Willpower roll (difficulty 7). All effects persist for (10 - Stamina) minutes after exposure ends, and the victim is down one die on all endurance-related rolls for another hour.

If the character is using Heightened Senses or is in Lupus form when she is hit, the penalties and effect duration are doubled.

Form: In its natural form, tear gas is actually a crystalline powder with little to no radius of effect — some pest control specialists advocate sprinkling it in attics and crawlspaces to get rid of rodent infestations. When tear gas is used by police, this powder is suspended in a liquid medium and sprayed as an aerosol (usually from a grenade, but occasionally from a handheld container).

Availability: Tear gas is legally available to most law enforcement officials (though they must justify its use after the fact). Tear gas grenades of both the thrown and launched varieties are easy to find on the street; most dealers in illicit firearms can get gas grenades too.

Resist Toxin: This Gift nullifies all effects of tear gas. However, the gas clouds are usually opaque and may impair vision as smoke would.

Protection: A gas mask provides complete protection in the short term, though clothing tends to soak up some residue and may continue to give off fumes for days after exposure. A wet cloth placed over the nose and mouth removes all penalties except those related to vision; this is a common expedient used by rioters.

Riot Gas

Also known as adamsite, this is a tear gas variant primarily employed by police forces and troops in the former Soviet Union and its client nations, where "humane" crowd control solutions take a back seat to effective measures. Its effects are similar to those of tear gas, but more intense and with the added effects of incapacitating abdominal cramps and loss of control over all gastrointestinal processes.

Effect: As per tear gas, but raise all dice pool penalties by one more die and double duration of effect. Additionally, an affected individual takes three dice of [bashing] damage, soaked normally. If she fails to soak any of this damage, she is overcome by violent projectile vomiting and loss of bladder and bowel control for (15 - Stamina) minutes, during which time she can take no action without spending a Willpower point.

Form: As per tear gas.

Availability: Adamsite is very difficult to obtain outside the former Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, simply because it's in such high demand there that it doesn't travel much. Quantities available in the western world are limited, and prices are painfully high (minimum four dots in Streetwise and a Streetwise roll [difficulty 9] just to locate the stuff).

Resist Toxin: As per tear gas, and the character automatically resists purgative effects.

Protection: As per tear gas.

Blister Agents

Blister agents (mustard gas, lewisite, CX) were among the first chemical weapons used in World War I. In theory, they incapacitate rather than kill, but their effects are severe enough to be fatal in many cases of exposure. Blister agents are slow-acting, with their effects gradually manifesting over a period of one to ten hours after a victim is exposed. They cause blistering and long-term scarring on all exposed body surfaces. If the gas is inhaled, this effect extends to the lungs. If it comes in contact with the eyes, the gas can cause permanent blindness.

Effects: When a character is first exposed to a blister agent, the Storyteller rolls one die; the result is the number of hours before the chemical begins to inflict injury. If the character washes completely (a simple quick shower won't be enough; decontamination requires a minimum of 30 minutes of scrubbing) before this time has elapsed, further effects are eliminated. Otherwise, the victim slowly takes 12 dice of aggravated damage over a period of 6 hours (one health level every half-hour or so). This damage is soaked with a single roll of Stamina (difficulty 8, shapeshifters add half their Rage [rounded down] to Stamina). If the character takes more than two health levels of damage, he may experience temporary or permanent eye damage or blindness or a permanent one-point drop in Appearance or Stamina (scarring on the skin or in the lungs) at the Storyteller's discretion.

Form: Blister agents are gaseous in form. Depending on the precise chemical compound used, they have either no odor or a strong, caustic scent. These chemicals are only manufactured in military warheads (artillery shells, air-dropped bombs, and missile warheads) — small containers are not created, though various terrorist organizations have the capability to improvise man-portable (suitcase- or thermos-sized) ones.



Availability: Blister agents are restricted by international treaty. They can only be created with a fully-equipped specialized laboratory, and the creator will probably die horribly if he doesn't use proper safety precautions. Several terrorist organizations are suspected to have the capability to produce blister agents, and most large chemical or pharmaceutical companies have the necessary laboratories and knowledge. Magadon manufactures various blister agents in small quantities for certain customers, but Pentex does not normally use them against Garou because of their delayed effects.

Resist Toxin: The character's Gnosis is added to the soak roll and the character only suffers additional effects if he takes more than three levels of damage.

Protection: Sealed goggles or a gas mask protects a victim's eyes (though if the skin is contaminated, later contact with the face can contaminate the eyes anyway), eliminating the potential for eye damage. A respirator or gas mask keeps a blister agent from entering the lungs, eliminating potential internal damage and adding 3 dice to the soak roll. A fully-sealed chemical warfare suit or other self-contained garment prevents all contact, which negates all effects of the blister agent — though anyone touching the outside of the protective suit before it's decontaminated risks low-level exposure (Storyteller's discretion).

Blood Agents

Also dating back to World War I, blood agents (AC, CK, prussic acid, phosgene) were some of the first chemical weapons that were specifically designed to kill. Their effects manifest within a few minutes of exposure and they kill within half an hour. Blood agents work by keeping the victim's lungs from bringing oxygen into the bloodstream — in other words, rapid suffocation.

Effects: When a character first inhales a blood agent, the Storyteller rolls one die and halves the result; this is the number of minutes before the character begins to take damage. A blood agent inflicts 16 dice of aggravated damage over a period of 15 minutes (one health level every minute or so). This is soaked with a single roll of Stamina (difficulty 8, shapeshifters add half their Rage [rounded down] to Stamina). If the character survives but takes four or more health levels of damage, he permanently loses a point of Stamina due to damage to his lungs.

Form: As blister agents, above.

Availability: As blister agents, above. Pentex has been experimenting with blood agents as potential anti-vampire weapons, but has not yet been able to conduct enough "live" tests to be certain how effective these substances will be against Leeches.

Resist Toxin: The character's Gnosis is added to the soak roll and the character will not lose Stamina regardless of how much damage he takes — assuming he survives.

Protection: A gas mask or respirator keeps a blood agent from entering the user's lungs, thus preventing all damage. An exposed character without a mask can try to hold his breath, using the same rules as drowning (see *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, p. 198); the character's Stamina determines how long he can keep from inhaling.

Nerve Agents

Nerve agents are the fastest acting, most lethal, and most feared chemical weapons in production today. They include such infamous names as sarin (GB), soman (GD), tabun (GA), and VX, and were initially developed during World War II. Nerve agents kill by blocking the neurochemical that stops transmission of nerve impulses — the victim loses all muscular control and eventually suffocates from his inability to breathe properly. However, before he dies, he goes through such tasteful sensations blurred vision, tightness in the chest, breathing difficulties, and a runny nose, then moves on to processes like involuntary drooling, urination, and defecation, muscle spasms over the entire body, and a short-lived coma. This all happens in five minutes or less. Nerve agents are skin-absorbed and can be fatal in amounts as low as 1/100,000,000 of the subject's body weight. Pound for pound, these substances are even more deadly than strategic nuclear weapons.

Effects: When a character first comes in contact with a nerve agent, the Storyteller rolls one die and halves the result. This is the number of turns before the character begins to take damage. A nerve agent inflicts 24 dice of aggravated damage, soaked with a single roll of Stamina (difficulty 9, add half of a shapeshifter's Rage to the soak roll). This damage is inflicted at the rate of one health level per turn until it's all been applied or the victim is dead. Survivors usually sustain permanent neurological damage (remove one point from a randomly-determined Attribute for every health level of damage the "lucky" survivor took).

Nerve agents can be counteracted with a rapid injection of atropine, a poison whose effects directly counter those of the nerve agent. If a character has been exposed, atropine halts all further damage starting with the turn *after* it was injected. If a character is injected with atropine without being exposed they take 10 dice of [lethal] damage, soaked normally. Roll damage and soak when the victim is first injected, but apply the unsoaked damage at a rate of one health level per half hour.

Nerve agents register as being Wyrms-tainted (difficulty 8 on a Sense Wyrms roll) simply by virtue of the philosophy behind their design and creation.

Form: Nerve agents are liquid at room temperature, and are usually deployed as aerosols. However, an open container of liquid nerve agent will evaporate enough particles to kill everyone in the room in a minute or less.

Availability: Don't even think about acquiring it for personal use. Nerve gas is the stuff that nightmares are made of; there are multiple international treaties devoted to eliminating it. Special Projects doesn't manufacture nerve agents on its own; it simply gives client governments and organizations the knowledge to do it themselves and stands back in case someone screws up. To date, Pentex has only used nerve agents in four operations, three of which took place in the Amazon against suspected caern sites.

Resist Toxin: The character's Gnosis is added to the soak roll and damage is applied at the rate of one health level per two turns.

Protection: The best protection from nerve gas is a military-grade vehicle or bunker with full NBC (Nuclear/Biological/Chemical) sealing. A full protective suit with an internal air supply will also protect, though its exterior must be decontaminated before the wearer can safely take it off. In theory, a room in a civilian dwelling can be sealed against gas attacks with adequate construction materials and a few hours of work, but this has never been tested.

Bubble, Bubble, Toil and Trouble

In addition to each division's particular agendas which are profiled in the appropriate sections, Magadon has quite a few projects going on that deserve individual attention. These are of particular interest to the Garou, as they're much more immediate threats to Gaia's defenders than most of the divisional agendas. This is not to say that they're the only threats, just that they don't easily fit under any one division's aegis — and are a bit more supernaturally inclined than most divisional projects.

Reservation Medical Network

Magadon hasn't yet been able to isolate the precise genetic sequences that cause lycanthropy — that's one area in which the Weaver's agents are ahead of those of the Wyrms (see DNA in *Book of the Weaver*). However, Pentex's contacts within the FBI (see Special Affairs Division in *Project Twilight*) have pointed it toward certain ethnic groups who have high probabilities of being source groups for Garou. Not all of these are groups that Magadon can move against: Irish and German populations are too widespread to be viable targets, and many are too completely integrated into their communities to be easily distinguished. However, many Native American tribes still maintain lifestyles that are largely separate from their neighbors of European extraction. This separation helps them to maintain traditions that would otherwise be compromised by homogenization with the greater populations of the United States and Canada, but it also makes them more prominent — and they are the other ethnic group that Pentex and its allies have identified as being closely tied to the werewolves.

The Reservation Medical Network is a former Autumn Health Management Systems program that Magadon took

over in its initial stages. It's a deceptively simple program. Many Native American tribes still live on reservations, or in communities that surround those reservations. Due to economic constraints and social pressure, the health care that they have available is of much lower quality than that which is enjoyed by their more prosperous and civilized neighbors. The RMN is a series of clinics located on or adjacent to reservations and catering specifically to Native Americans. These clinics provide fully modern treatments at minimal cost (most expenses are absorbed by Magadon in exchange for tax breaks) and are staffed by Magadon employees whose training focuses on the ailments most common to their patient groups. It's a very humanitarian enterprise, and several feature stories have been done on the dedicated Magadon personnel who are bringing modern medicine to some of the last truly disadvantaged individuals in the country.

Of course, the phrase "too good to be true" is painfully accurate here.

Right now, the RMN program is still in its information-gathering stages. Under the cover story of "screening for rare genetic defects common to isolated populations," all patients at RMN clinics are asked to provide blood and tissue samples. These samples, along with the patient's medical records and videotapes of examinations, are forwarded to a Magadon lab in North Dakota for analysis and cataloguing. These are cross-referenced with "acquired" FBI files on the subject's criminal history, if any, and any suspected connections to what the FBI's Special Affairs Division knows as the "Type-A lycanthrope" population.

Once the RMN has acquired enough information for Magadon to formulate a plan of action, the project's covert focus is expected to shift radically. Most projections place this turnover point as no more than two years off. Currently, Magadon is evaluating various options for the RMN to pursue when this time comes. The front-runner in these ongoing debates is an "immunization program" used to deliver a tailored genetic agent that would eliminate the ability of the subjects to transmit the "lycanthrope genetic sequence" to their offspring. Failing this, mass sterilization is also an option, though the negative publicity resulting from such an "accident" might prove more damaging than the level of success would justify.

Wyrms Faux

Militaries have long been familiar with the concept of deployable decoys: if you send out a lot of harmless things that look just like your real forces, the enemy will have a much harder time of detecting and killing the actual threats. Pentex has adapted this tactic in dealing with the Garou; the forces of the Wyrms are well-aware that their Gaian adversaries can sense the supernatural presence of corruption, and Wyrms Faux is one of Magadon's answers to this ability.

Wyrms Faux is a supernatural substance distributed in randomly-selected doses of Magadon-made pharmaceuticals. It's chemically undetectable and inert; its presence doesn't

alter or reduce the effectiveness of whatever drug or foodstuff it's in. Its only effect is on the supernatural level: after consumption, Wyrms Faux gives its unfortunate subject an "aura of Wyrms." For approximately a week (10 days minus the victim's Willpower; remember ordinary humans have an average Willpower of 3), Sense Wyrms shows the subject to be Wyrms-tainted (difficulty 5). If the subject is killed while under this effect, it immediately dissipates upon his death.

There are no other effects of Wyrms Faux whatsoever. As a matter of fact, the "tainted" individual isn't really Wyrms-corrupted (at least, not from Wyrms Faux, though if he was already tainted from other means he remains that way). The entire point of Wyrms Faux is to make the Garou *think* that someone is tainted when, in fact, he's perfectly clean and harmless.

This serves several purposes for Pentex. The first is to disguise the Wyrms's actual movements by hiding them within a smokescreen of completely unaware decoys. It's a lot harder for the Garou to find true agents of the Wyrms when everyone in a given neighborhood seems to be one. A subsidiary effect of this is to demoralize the Garou through the appearance of overwhelming strength: a werewolf who sees the enemy *everywhere* is going to be very edgy, and will be a lot more hesitant to act.

The second objective of Wyrms Faux is to make the Garou more paranoid. They're not immune to its effects; a Shadow Lord who takes Wyrms Faux-tainted painkillers for his hangover is going to show up as Wyrms-tainted when he goes to the moot that night. However, if he's killed by the warders, his corpse *won't* seem to be tainted—which will lead to even more accusations, denials, challenges, and suspicion.

Finally, Magadon hopes that Wyrms Faux will provoke some of the more hotheaded Garou into open attacks on innocent targets. If a high school's flu shots are laden with Wyrms Faux and a pack of hotheaded cubs tear apart a few dozen of their "tainted" classmates in the name of "combating the Wyrms," they've been discredited in the eyes of both their elders and the mortal authorities. Thus is the Wyrms's work done.

If cooler heads prevail, Wyrms Faux's effects can easily be dispelled with a Rite of Cleansing (difficulty 4).

Bane Lures

Although decoy ploys such as Wyrms Faux are effective in diverting attention away from the Wyrms's true forces, Magadon also recognizes the value of sowing random terror and despair. With its global distribution network, the pharmaceutical conglomerate is perfectly suited to spread all manner of filth in seemingly mad patterns. Bane Lures are one such item: the equivalent of a spiritual minefield anchored to an unwitting mortal victim.

Physically, a Bane Lure is a tiny pellet made of powdered Black Spiral Dancer bone, small enough to fit inside a pill the size of a pain reliever tablet—in fact, most Bane Lures are distributed under such a disguise, hidden in bottles

of Tyranull, Seldaphed, or other over-the-counter drugs. If a Bane Lure is crushed (say, through chewing), it breaks up into a white, bitter-tasting powder. If it's swallowed, however, the inert coating is dissolved in the victim's stomach and the Lure comes to rest in her appendix (if the appendix has already been removed, the Lure is excreted and flushed without becoming active).

Once lodged safely in the victim's appendix, a Bane Lure extends a pair of tiny probes into its host's bloodstream, leeching off tiny amounts of nutrients to keep itself functioning. Within a few days, it begins radiating a subtle call through the Penumbra, beckoning to any Banes that happen to be nearby. However, the Lure does not call the Banes to act against its host — she's off-limits, as it were. Instead, the Banes concentrate their activity on those around her. The strength of the Bane Lure's call depends on that of its host, as it's using her own mental energy to power its summons. For every point of permanent Willpower that the host has, the Lure calls one or more Banes with a total of 10 Gnosis to her vicinity. This activity scales up gradually: no more than 10 Gnosis points per week. For example, a victim with 4 Willpower will be surrounded by Banes with a total of 10 Gnosis in the first week of hosting, a total of 20 Gnosis in the second week, 30 in the third week, and 40 thereafter.

A Bane Lure has a finite period of function before it breaks down. When it becomes active, the Storyteller rolls the host's Willpower (difficulty 6). Each success is two months that the Lure remains active before crumbling to dust and being passed out of the victim's system. When this occurs, the Storyteller should secretly roll the victim's Stamina (difficulty equal to the number of months the Lure was in place). A failed roll indicates that the Lure has caused the victim to develop appendicitis; a botch indicates cancer of the colon.

While a person is hosting a Bane Lure, she is marginally Wyrms-tainted (difficulty 10 to detect; difficulty 4 if viewed from the Umbra). A Bane Lure can be removed with surgery (an extended Intelligence + Medicine roll [difficulty 8]: one roll per hour, a total of six successes needed to remove an appendix) or with a Rite of Cleansing. Note that it's very difficult to detect a Bane Lure in the first place; Sense Wyrms doesn't usually point to a specific part of a tainted individual's anatomy. Garou can become Bane Lure hosts.

Bane-in-a-Bottle

As noted earlier, Magadon has had some amount of success with binary substances, both chemical and biological. These programs' effectiveness inspired Magadon's more esoteric researchers to attempt something a little more complex: binary Bane infestations. This technique is still fairly rare due to the amount of work involved, but it's slowly showing signs of progress.

The first phase of a "bottled Bane" infestation occurs in a Magadon factory. A single package of pills or bottle of serum receives a dormant Bane that's bound into it by Black Spiral Theurges or human specialists. That medicine is then

shipped to a pharmacist or hospital, just as any other would be. The patient who receives it also gets a little passenger: a sleeping Wyrms-spirit that quietly attaches itself to him and settles in to slumber.

The second phase of the infestation is prepared simultaneously, though it usually comes months or years later. Products from Magadon and other Pentex companies are laced with trace amounts of umbrophrenol-6. This is an inert, undetectable chemical derived from the liquid secretions of several types of Bane that has the unique property of acting as a stimulant to dormant spirits. In other words, a dormant Bane (or other spirit) whose host comes in contact with umbrophrenol-6 is instantly awakened. The unwitting subject is instantly Bane-ridden, and is usually transformed to a full fomor within six hours.

In many cases, the active Bane manifests no outward signs. The subject simply displays a radical shift in personality and physical capabilities. This is particularly true of the Banes who are "packaged" with over-the-counter and prescription drugs that are known to have strong negative interactions with other substances. Stories of people mixing alcohol and drugs and turning psychotic at parties are occasionally a result of this program.

An individual with a dormant Bane attached to him shows no signs of the infestation in the physical world (difficulty 10 to detect with Sense Wyrms). It's painfully obvious in the Umbra, however. A dormant bane can be safely separated from its host by a Rite of Cleansing enacted in the Umbra, or it can be removed in a more dangerous fashion through combat — though this sometimes kills the host in the process.

Handicapped Psychic Latency Program

In the 1950s, a drug called Thalidomide was introduced in Europe as a treatment for nausea and insomnia in pregnant women. Before it was approved for use in the United States, hundreds of children were born to Thalidomide users with serious physical birth defects, including missing or flipper-like limbs and severe gastrointestinal malformation. Thalidomide was immediately taken off the market; it's only recently been re-introduced, very cautiously, as a possible treatment for some types of skin conditions and cancer.

In the late 1960s, the first children born with Thalidomide-induced defects entered puberty. An observant Magadon

Fair Warning

Storytellers should be advised: although many of the topics that this chapter covers are rather sensitive, birth defects are some of the most emotionally volatile subjects in the medical field — particularly for women who want children or are pregnant. Be certain of your players' sensitivity thresholds before springing this one on them; it may be a little bit more personal horror than some of them are comfortable confronting, even in a gaming situation.

statistician attached to a Project Odyssey facility in Germany noted a surprising trend: approximately 2% of those children manifested some sort of psychic activity, a number several orders of magnitude above that of the population at large. He notified his supervisor, and Odyssey researchers immediately began looking for the correlation between Thalidomide's chemical structure and psychic activation.

Twelve years and several thousand test subjects later, Magadon and Odyssey were no further toward discovering the key to Thalidomide's relationship with psychic ability. The program was a week from being canceled when another statistician, acting on the faintest glimmer of suspicion, came up with another set of figures: children born with physical deformities, regardless of the cause, shared a higher rate of psychic activity than those without gross malformation. The trigger that Odyssey had been searching for had never been Thalidomide itself, but rather some indefinable factor in the human brain that raises levels of psychic potential during puberty to compensate for physical handicaps.

Since that breakthrough, Odyssey and Magadon have embarked on a joint program of testing and recruiting handicapped individuals. Odyssey's ranks of active psychics have nearly tripled in the past decade; the Project is one of the few areas where such individuals can not only equal, but exceed, the abilities of "normal" humans. Some researchers have suggested deliberately altering Magadon drugs to induce certain specific birth defects in the hopes of discovering a reliable means of creating powerful psychics, but no such program is known to be in operation, neither in Magadon nor under Project Odyssey. Were such steps to be taken, no tangible results would be available for at least a dozen years; nevertheless, the proposal does circulate whenever funding allocation is discussed. As it stands, Pentex has a large pool of potential recruits for Project Odyssey, individuals who would be profoundly loyal and willing to work very hard in exchange for training in their latent psychic abilities.

Specialized Drugs

In addition to its various "normal" products (both legal and illegal), Magadon is the primary source of Pentex's specialized chemicals whose use aids the Wyrms in some manner. The following is not a definitive list so much as a starting point. Storytellers are encouraged to let their fiendish imaginations run wild.

Delerex Lupus-7

One of the main problems that Pentex-backed troops face when fighting shapeshifters is the Delirium. It's kind of hard to maintain unit cohesion when most of the soldiers are running in frenzied terror from something that their ancestral hindbrains recognize as an implacable, unkillable predator. The Delerex Lupus series of drugs is a synthetic fight/flight suppressant derived from various sources, including the aggression pheromones of Black Spiral test subjects. Version -7 mostly eliminates the earlier formulas' problems

with chemical lobotomization after extended use, though there are still some hazards. Some First Team members claim that DL7 causes impotence and sleep deprivation, though there is no clinical evidence to suggest this.

Effects: When injected, DL7 makes the user immune to the Delirium for (6 - Stamina) hours. During this time, the recipient's Intelligence and Wits are reduced by 1 each (minimum 1). If the character uses DL7 more than once in a 24-hour period, the player must roll Stamina (difficulty 5 + the number of DL7 doses taken in the past 24 hours). A failed roll indicates that the character permanently loses a point of Intelligence (characters who go to zero Intelligence become unplayable vegetables).

Form: DL7 is a clear blue liquid. It's distributed to First Team personnel and other Pentex employees in autoinjectors if Garou activity is anticipated. If the employees in question are unaware of the nature of the Garou, they're told that animal rights activists or other groups hostile to Pentex interests have threatened to use hallucinogenic gases against the company's holdings. The labels on the autoinjectors support this cover story with a lot of intricate medical terminology that translates appropriately.

Availability: The Delerex Lupus series is only available from Magadon, though it's widely distributed throughout Pentex. Monkeywrenchers have acquired samples of versions -4 and -6, and they're using those as a starting point for an artificial Delirium-inducing gas.

Anagath F45.6

To the rest of Pentex, Anagath F45.6 is one of Magadon's miracle drugs. It retards the aging process by an approximate factor of ten, granting the regular user a vastly extended lifespan. Several Pentex board members are known to be on F45.6. It's an accepted staple of the upper echelon health plans, having been around since Magadon was still Magadon Limited in the late 1940s. By now, no one really thinks about it.

If the truth ever got out, Magadon's Gerontology Division would be decimated by First Teams within a week.

Anagath F45.6 isn't a Magadon product, though the company does repack and distribute it within the Pentex corporate structure. It's produced by a subsidiary that was one of Magadon Limited's first business partners: Campesi Gerontological Research. Magadon's been trying to analyze F45.6 since Campesi handed over the first batch in late 1947. However, the chemical cocktail that makes up this drug is too complex to be broken down completely, because it appears to contain trace elements of several supernatural substances that can't be reproduced in the laboratory.

CGR is covertly backed by the Giovanni family of vampires, Pentex's occasional associates. In fact, it was formerly the pet project of the late Enzo Giovanni. F45.6 contains vampire blood at a very thin dilution, mixed with a few dozen substances of varying effect. It's not enough to create full-fledged servitors or instill the chemical brain-

washing that undiluted "vitae" seems to induce (ghouls and the Blood Bond, respectively, if you're using **Vampire: The Masquerade**), but it does extend the subject's lifespan and make him more susceptible to the posthypnotic suggestion methods that vampires most commonly use. However, since Enzo and five of his offspring were killed in 1998, CGR has been without a steady supply of vampire blood with the potency required for F45.6 production. They've managed to maintain production thus far by using frozen reserves, but they're running out and trying to find a new source. Several CGR executives suspect that Enzo was using F45.6 to manipulate his fellow board members and was killed when this was discovered, and they're expecting the First Team axe to come down on CGR any day now.

Effects: Anagath F45.6 slows the aging process of a regular user (one dose a month) by a factor of 10. This has no game effect in the short term, but it can allow the Storyteller to create Pentex executives who are wise beyond their apparent years. Anagath F45.6 only works on "normal" humans: anyone with any supernatural characteristics beyond the occasional Merit or Flaw is out of luck. At the Storyteller's discretion, all attempts to use vampire mind control powers on an F45.6 patient are at -1 difficulty.

Form: F45.6 is a pale yellow liquid. It's administered through injection.

Availability: Due to limited supplies, this is only available to Pentex executives who are in the \$80,000/year or higher salary brackets. Occasionally a lower-ranking employee is given a "special health plan option:" this usually goes to elderly researchers who Pentex doesn't want to lose to old age.

Psiphrenol

Used by Project Odyssey personnel to enhance their powers, Psiphrenol is a combat drug for psychics. It enhances their reflex speed, cognitive abilities, and power levels for a brief time. When administered to humans who

aren't psychically active, however, it's a potentially lethal neurotoxin. Psiphrenol is in very limited supply, because it's derived from the spinal fluid of dead psychics. This fact isn't as secret as Magadon would like it to be, but most Odyssey psychics don't give a damn — the endorphin rush that's Psiphrenol's primary side-effect alleviates a lot of moral uncertainty about its source. Psiphrenol can cause permanent neurological damage if overused.

Effects: When injected into a psychic, Psiphrenol stays active for (10 - Stamina) turns. During this time, the character gets one extra action per turn, gains one dot in all Mental Attributes, and gets a number of additional dice on all psychic power rolls equal to his modified Intelligence.

For each dose of Psiphrenol past the first that a character uses in a 24-hour period, the player must roll Stamina (difficulty 5 + the number of doses of Psiphrenol taken in the past 24 hours). Failure inflicts one health level of [lethal] damage on the psychic and reduces his permanent Willpower score by one dot. A botch has the same effect as a failed roll, but also permanently reduces each of the character's psychic powers by one dot.

If injected into a normal human, Psiphrenol does 7 dice of aggravated damage, applied at one health level per turn. It has no effect on any supernatural being other than a human psychic.

Form: Psiphrenol is a clear yellow liquid with a faint acidic odor. Magadon and Project Odyssey package it in unlabeled autoinjectors for use by Odyssey psychics.

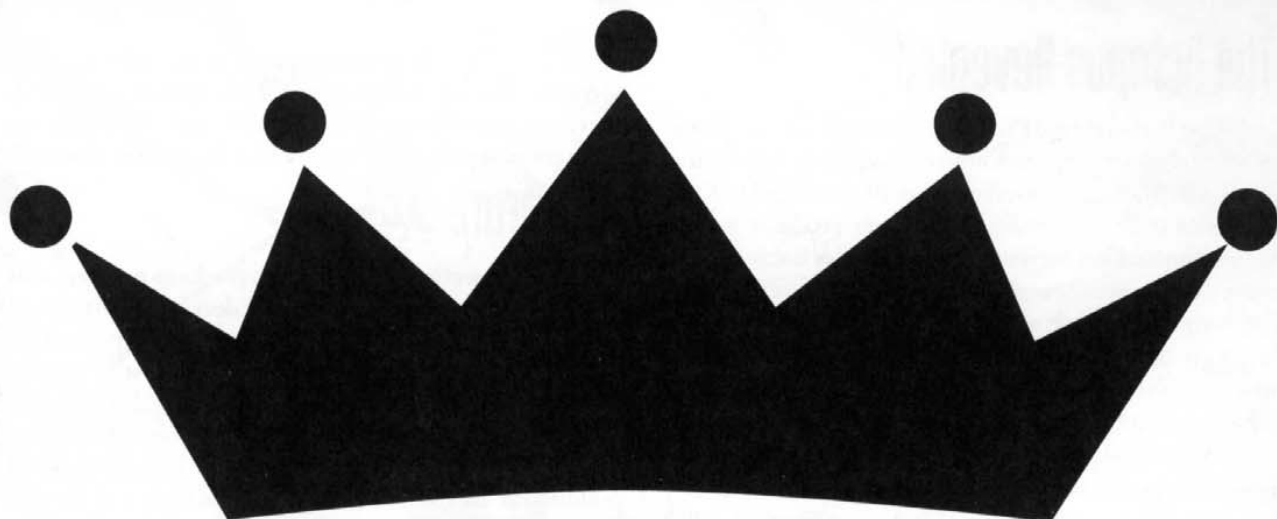
Availability: Project Odyssey's morgue/laboratory in Taos, New Mexico is the only current production facility for Psiphrenol. Psychics who die (or are killed) are shipped there for immediate "extraction." There's not exactly a large supply of them, and Pentex will go to some lengths to acquire the corpse of a psychic who wasn't previously affiliated with the company. One intact cadaver yields approximately ten doses of the drug.



MAGADON

Magadon—Building a better you.





KING

Breweries & Distilleries

Drinking makes such fools of people, and people are such fools to begin with that it's compounding a felony.

— Robert Benchley

The man was tall, rangy and handsome, in a weather-beaten sort of way. His hair had gone iron-gray at the temples, and he wore jeans and a muted flannel shirt. He strode onto the scene with a long, easy stride, then turned to face the camera with a pleasant smile.

"Hello. I'm Jeremy King, President of King Breweries, and I'm here to talk to you about something very important to all of us: clean water." King put one booted foot on top of a boulder and assumed a serious expression. "Clean water is what gives our beers their special crisp flavor. We wouldn't dream of brewing a single bottle of King without making sure that we used the purest ingredients possible — and that means starting with fresh, clean mountain water. My great-great-grandfather was on the expedition that found the headwaters of this river, and my family has been drawing its cool, clear waters to make the finest beers ever since. That's why we here at King are so concerned about keeping our nation's waterways as clean and pure as possible. We know what clean water means to us, and we know what it means to you. That's why King has formed the AquaClear 2001 Foundation, a charity dedicated to cleaning up our—"

"Jesus Christ on a crutch, what the hell is that smell?" Red-faced and furious, King turned to see who had spoken. The culprit

was the cameraman, whose face had adopted an expression of utter disgust. A cool breeze off the water wafted over the filming area, and various members of the crew seemed to be variously disgusted by the scent on the breeze. King, however, seemed unaffected.

"It's okay, Jeremy," said the commercial's director, a round-faced little man wearing a blue windbreaker and jeans. The first day on the set, the director had learned that Jeremy really, really liked all of his employees, even the short-timers, to act and dress according to the King tradition. That meant jeans, boots and an absolute adherence to King's whims. "We can take that out in edit, and pick up from where we left off. It's all right. Really." Left unsaid, of course, was the fact that whatever was in that water smelled like a three-week old carcass left on the side of the road.

King spat, once, in the river. "You'd better be able to fix that in edit, because I'm not doing another take. If you can't, that's the last King commercial you shoot, period. And get that asshole behind the camera off the set, now. If he's on payroll, I want him transferred to janitorial. If he's not, throw him off site. And charge him for the time we just wasted because he couldn't take a little fresh air, the pantywaist."

"Of course, Jeremy," the director agreed. "Whatever you say." And he scurried off to do Jeremy King's bidding.

The Octopus Revealed

King Breweries and Distilleries is actually a hodgepodge of seven distinct corporate entities ranging in size from a small, wholly owned microbrewery in Rhode Island to King Breweries itself, the fourth-largest beer producer in the United States. King Breweries and Distilleries is actually the name of the umbrella organization and the Pentex holding company under which all seven are organized.

King Breweries is, of course, the largest of the companies under the aegis of this particular branch of Pentex. The other six, in size order, are:

- King Spirits, which manufactures various distilled alcoholic beverages for sale under the King and associated labels
- Ruskaiya Distilleries, a manufacturer of generic vodka which sells its product to various repackagers and resellers
- Dragon Valley Vineyards, an up-and-comer in the highly competitive California wine industry
- King Imports, the American distributor for several European, Asian and Caribbean beers.
- Thaw Beverages, which manufactures seltzers, tonic water and other mixers
- Ten Tickle Ales, a microbrewery entirely owned and funded by King Breweries.

Each of these is expected to fulfill two missions: To be profitable (8% is the minimum acceptable margin, or heads roll — and Pentex isn't always figurative about that sort of thing), and to advance Pentex's overall agenda by furthering the corruption of the planet. As with other Pentex subsidiaries, the overwhelming majority of the employees of the various King companies have no idea that they're doing anything other than producing cheap booze. They come in for their shifts, work hard to get product out the door, and go home clutching their slightly-below-industry-standard paychecks without the vaguest inkling that they're doing anything worse than foisting yet another mass-produced American pisswater beer on the unsuspecting public. That is, of course, precisely the way upper management likes it, and it's part of why King is so successful. By constantly fostering a crisis mentality among its employees with constant exhortations about vanishing market share (false), shrinking profit margins (true), and impending layoffs or reorganizations (always a possibility these days), management keeps its workers in constant terror of unemployment or worse. That keeps the production staff working at fever pitch to pump out more booze, sales frantic to get it on shelves and everyone too afraid for their jobs to ask for raises, improved working conditions and the like.

On the other hand, King's organization-wide policy is that employees get a free six-pack (or the equivalent) a week, plus deep discounts on additional product. Not very many people actually follow up on this, but those who do tend to be the company "lifers" — the ones who never bitch

about the low pay or the working conditions, and who never seem to be looking for other work. Most of these individuals gravitate, sooner or later, to the night shift, which has its own unique reputation — especially at King Breweries itself.

Corporate

King Breweries and Distilleries produces nothing, sells nothing and does nothing — except decide the destinies of the various companies under its aegis. Incorporated in Delaware, KBD consists of a small executive staff with an immense travel budget and the secretarial and legal apparatus to keep the whole organization functioning. The entire operation fits neatly onto one floor of a Pentex-owned building in downtown Denver, from which the dreaded dictates of "Corporate" (as it is known to the subsidiary corporations) are launched. Such orders can cover anything from the color of a product's label to the composition of an entire batch of beer, and woe betide the middle manager who does not act on one of these missives *immediately*. Somehow, some way Corporate always knows exactly who's doing what they've been told and who isn't, and they act accordingly. Those who are merely fired should count themselves lucky; truly obstinate employees are transferred elsewhere in the organization, where their stubbornness and aggressive resistance to authority can be put to... better use. The fact that the memos staffers are asked to follow are often bullheaded at best, nonsensical at worst is no excuse. Corporate has a vision of what the company should be doing — to the marketplace, and to its employees — and as far as it's concerned, everything is working out just fine.

Even worse than memos from the home office are the coronary-inducing surprise inspections, in which executives and accountants from Corporate will drop in unannounced on a branch office, plant or sales office to see how things are coming along. The answer to that question had better be "swimmingly," or the on-site team from Corporate will be forced to make some recommendations for improvements. The recommendations range anywhere from morale-deadening layoffs and pay reductions to complete reorganizations, but they're never pleasant. Furthermore, the beer (or wine, or vodka, or whatever) is expected to keep flowing without interruption even through periods of radical upheaval; failure to keep up with production quotas invites the on-site team back for a follow-up visit.

Mostly what Corporate does, however, is chart the course of the various King companies' financial and spiritual futures. It is Corporate who adjusts the fine balance between advancing corruption and making a buck. It is Corporate that decides that there's more "additive" in a bottle of Ten Tickle Summerfest than there is in a bottle of Ruskaiya vodka, and why. And God help anyone who decides to argue with, talk back to or otherwise incur the wrath of Corporate. After all, employees are replaceable. Companies are replaceable. But Corporate isn't going anywhere.



The Hideous Truth

The hideous truth about Corporate is exactly what it seems to be. Here's where the decisions affecting the lives and souls of thousands, if not millions of people are made. While the workers at Dragon Valley, Ten Tickle and the like may have some small idea that something's not right, and the management at such places have a view of the limited evil in their purviews, it's only at Corporate that the big picture gets spread out. Here's where the King family has seen the future as Pentex has revealed it, and embraced that picture.

The King family firmly controls the entire King empire. It's a family business, with cousins, nephews and whatnot continuously brought into the fold, and those who go elsewhere are shunned. On the other hand, there's a concerted effort to produce lawyers, accountants and the like from within the family, to avoid reliance on outsiders. Women are discouraged from joining the family business, as it's seen as "man's work," and most of the older Kings are uncomfortable with even the notion of women in management positions.

The head of the company, and by extension the whole conglomerate, is Jeremy King. His father, Dexter, is still alive but on a respirator with what has been described as "a degenerative lung condition." With Dexter safely out of the way, Jeremy rules the roost with an iron fist, surrounded by an advisory committee comprised of his two brothers, David and Louis, and a half-dozen cousins, uncles and members of the next generation.

Jeremy King

Background: Jeremy was brought up in the lap of luxury, but decided early on it wasn't big enough for him. It was nothing but the best for Jeremy; private tutors, private schools and the like. But Jeremy's father, Dexter, was a stern man who believed in hard work, and he made each of his sons spend at least one summer working in the brewery. It was to understand the value of a dollar and the nature of the business, Dexter King said. And so when Jeremy was 15, he spent the summer working in the main brewery building, handling a variety of jobs so he'd acquire a working knowledge of the whole operation.

Jeremy never forgave his father for that. He worked hard that summer, and learned everything the plant had to offer. He went back to school and ran a 4.0, which got him into Dartmouth. From there it was on to Wharton Business School, and then home to take up his rightful place in the King hierarchy.

It was Jeremy who made the first tentative, surreptitious contacts with Pentex about buying out King. It was Jeremy who brokered the deal, and who presented it as a *fait accompli* to the board. And when Dexter objected, it was Jeremy who went back to his new-found patrons for some assistance in getting his father out of the way.

So now Dexter writhes in a hospital bed with tubes in his throat and hate in his eyes, because he knows that somehow, some way his son is the one responsible for the

disease that's carving his lungs into bloody chunks. Jeremy makes sure to visit every day and bring his father reports on how well the business is doing because, as he tells the nurses, he's sure that Dad would want to know.

In the meantime, Jeremy oversees the day-to-day operations of King's far-flung empire. Aware that what he did to his father could easily be done to him, he has surrounded himself with a cadre of fanatically loyal cousins, uncles and the like. Those who seem inclined to argue too much with his policy decisions get shipped out to subsidiaries or field offices, while loyal supporters are rewarded. The Kings have always been a pragmatic family, and the lesson is learned quickly.

Image: Jeremy is handsome, in a well-used sort of way. The outdoorsman image he cultivates is only partially a pose; he does like riding, hunting and other outdoor pursuits. He just likes making money and imposing his will more.

As a result, Jeremy is now a well-tanned and relaxed-looking man of 45, with an easy smile that never reaches his sharp blue eyes. He prefers to dress business casual, but insists on formal business wear from his employees and associates. Jeremy stands just over six feet tall and weighs 200 pounds. He played linebacker for Dartmouth in his college days, and his build still reflects this.

Roleplaying Hints: You are in charge, and you are right. Anyone who can't keep up with your pace is a wimp, anyone who second guesses you is an idiot and anyone who gets in your way is a speed bump. Other people quite literally do not matter to you, though you learned how to fake sincerity and interest early on. There's a special place in your heart for tormenting your father. Dear old Dad may be a right-wing blowhard, but he was dead set against the Pentex deal from day one and it drives him absolutely insane with fury to see the way King has been integrated.

Note: Jeremy generally has at least one bodyguard hovering unobtrusively in his vicinity. While Jeremy himself has proven remarkably resistant to Banes and other forms of spiritual invasion, he's quick to make use of fomori to protect himself if he needs to. He just prefers to keep the monsters discreetly out of sight most of the time. After all, he has an image to maintain.

Dexter

If there's one man at King who can bring Jeremy's plans to a crashing halt, it's his father, Dexter. Confined to a hospital bed and in constant, tearing agony from his lung condition, Dexter still clings to his full faculties through a combination of sheer stubbornness and his son's sadism. Jeremy has taken great pains to make sure his father's body goes first, and then his mind, so that he can savor the old man's awareness of his own disintegration.

That just might be Jeremy's undoing. Dexter is one sharp bastard, and he's got his thumb on everything his son's doing. That's primarily because Jeremy makes a point of telling him, in mind-numbing detail, but also because there are still a few Kings loyal to the old man, and these moles in

Jeremy's empire keep Dexter informed of the things Jeremy doesn't pass along.

At his core, Dexter King is a thoroughly unpleasant human being. He is bitter, hateful, possessed of attitudes toward race and gender that can only be described as horrifying and generally as spiteful a frustrated autocrat as one can imagine. Furthermore, he was this way before his lungs started to go, and in all probability most Garou would gladly take the opportunity to rid the planet of such a blot on its escutcheon. But faced with the choice of Dexter or Jeremy, Garou seeking to take King down might find themselves forced to make a most unlikely and unpalatable alliance with the terrible old man of King Breweries.

Other Kings

• David King

David is the King brother who doesn't go out in public too often. While his brother Jeremy has made financial deals with Pentex, David's made darker ones. He still fits into a suit, more or less, but some of the bulges underneath the Versace are getting noticeable and embarrassing.

David's twin motivations are envy and fear of Jeremy. That means that he does everything he can to please and obey his brother, while loathing every minute of it and impotently plotting a spectacularly grotesque revenge. However, it seems unlikely that David will ever work up the courage to do anything to his brother. Jeremy is quite aware of how David feels, and is perfectly happy to play with him so long as he gets his work done.

David currently holds the title of COO of King Breweries and Distilleries, and operates in that role with flair and distinction. Jeremy may be the drive behind King, but David is the one who makes it all work on a day-to-day level. His loss would be absolutely devastating to the entire King concern.

• Louis King

Louis is the exact opposite of David, honestly and totally devoted to Jeremy. A full dozen years younger than his big brother, Louis has idolized Jeremy his entire life and is more than happy to do whatever Jeremy wants him to do. In fact, Louis has recently gone in for a bit of reconstructive surgery that trimmed his nose a bit, sharpened his chin and in all ways made him look that much more like his boss.

As puppydogish as Louis is inside the family, he's just as bulldoggish outside it. As King's in-house legal counsel (he oversees a team of four full-time lawyers and a rather extensive department beyond that), he's a terror in the courtroom. It's rare that Louis actually wins a case, to be honest. He either intimidates the opposition into signing off on a ludicrous settlement or drags the case into a morass of appeals and retrials that inevitably wear his opponents down.

• Jan Taper

Taper is the new man at King, and he's got his eye on Jeremy's job. A King by marriage rather than blood, Taper is currently the head of the on-site inspection teams. He uses that position to try to garner allies and information for an

eventual coup-de-etat, and figures that his time is coming in about two years. He's even made overtures to Dexter King, who thus far has refused to commit to helping an outsider take his family's rightful inheritance. Taper's a patient man, though, and he'll wait for Dexter to come around.

Jeremy is well aware of Jan's ambition, but takes him lightly. After all, he's not a *real* King.

Why?

The Kings are, by all appearances, an extremely successful, tight-knit family. They're not Black Spiral Kinfolk; indeed, most are rather attractive, in a bland, Middle-American sort of way. They've got money, authority, political power and free beer whenever they want it. Why throw in with Pentex?

The answer is simple: Arrogance. The Kings look around, and see everything the way they want it to be — within limits. Outside those limits, however, things aren't so rosy. The Kings can't do anything about Anheuser-Busch, though they'd love to, and that boils their blood. They're the Kings, dammit, and the fact that the world stubbornly refuses to conform to all of their wishes is a continuing canker in their happiness. Throwing in their lot with Pentex ensures that if the program for domination succeeds, the Kings get the last laugh on their rivals. And once the liquor industry is under their thumb, what's to keep them from expanding their horizons?

So the Kings know exactly what they're doing. The orders from Corporate which seem so baffling are actually in accordance with the wider vision for the whole family of companies. Each has its role in the legitimate marketplace as well as in the hidden agenda, and the Kings tend their properties very carefully. They know which of their managers are human, which aren't and which are in transit. They know what flavor of corruption each of their companies does or can sow, and they meter the flow of foulness exactly.

The Crown Jewel: King Breweries

King Breweries is not the be-all and end-all of the King empire, but it's certainly the largest and most important of the King companies. It was founded in 1884 by Arthur King, a British immigrant who found himself in Colorado with a recipe for beer, a little seed money and a lot of thirsty neighbors. Since that time, the once-small family business has grown into a monstrous conglomerate, with its tendrils in almost all aspects of the alcohol and distillation business. The company is a major player in local and even national politics, one of the largest producers of beer in the world and generally a force to be reckoned with, while the King family still controls operations as tightly as it ever has. One of the terms of the Pentex buyout — in which the Kings got equal value in Pentex stock — was that the family retain autonomy of operation. Surprisingly enough to the Kings, their new owners agreed. After all, the Kings were doing Pentex' work just fine on their own already. Why mess with success?

The Hideous Truth

Contrary to what you might expect, King Breweries does not cook up monstrous vats of Wyrms-tainted beer that turn hordes of brewskie-swilling fratboys and football fans into ravenous, ichor-dripping monstrosities (at least, none that aren't already in that state). Remember, King sells a *lot* of beer, and if a six-pack were enough to turn a customer into a slaving fomor, either the country would be neck-deep in boojums or someone at the Food and Drug Administration would have done something about that state of affairs. After all, Pentex has pull, but not quite enough to cover up something of that magnitude.

Instead, King's core beer business focuses on the little things. Their beers aren't teratogenic. Instead, they're just a touch heavier than other beers. They give you just a tad more of a hangover the next day. They're a trifle more addictive and wreak just a little bit more havoc on your liver than comparable beers from other breweries. They make mean drunks a little meaner and self-destructive drunks a little more self-destructive. They make the wobbling loser who needs to get home that much more reluctant to hand over his keys and call a cab, and they empower drunken misbehavior — vandalism, assault and the like — just a tad more than they might.

In other words, everything they do is in tiny, tiny increments. It's barely noticeable in a given can or bottle, or even in the effects on a single consumer.

But remember, they sell a lot of beer. An awful lot.

The Brewery

King's Brewery is a monstrous installation that squats astride the Blue River, taking water from the stream into the factory and spewing out sludge and beer byproducts. Over 9000 people work in the plant proper, and that's before taking into consideration the nearby executive offices, the shipping operations and the like. The brewery, which rises sixteen stories into the air and is filled with massive copper brewing vats, operates continuously, with three shifts of employees shuffling in and out around the clock. A private road winds its way to the back of the bottling operation, where trucks zoom in and out all night to load up with King products and take them out to an unsuspecting world. Offices of plant managers and the like ring the upper floors of the brewery proper, but most of the building is given over to the brewing process itself.

Security at the plant is extremely tight. Not only is King quite paranoid about its employees, but Corporate is nearly beside itself with worry over corporate espionage. This sort of thing is endemic to the industry under normal circumstances, but with the extra ingredients King puts in its brews, having its recipes get stolen could be disastrous. As such, there are a series of checkpoints that anyone approaching the factory must pass through, and IDs must be presented at each. The guards at these checkpoints are armed, and there

are additional bands of roving security officers patrolling King property at all times, just in case. Most of those guards are simply trigger-happy normal humans; a few are a bit more than that. All, however, tote around assault rifles and enough ammunition to lay waste to a small country—or to an intruding pack of Garou.

Unlike many of its competitors, King does not offer factory tours with complimentary beer at the end. Instead, the brewery is essentially the King family's keep and fiefdom, and they do their best to keep outsiders at a distance. Employee loyalty is expected to be absolute and unquestioning, though management doesn't necessarily go out of its way to reciprocate. Working conditions in the brewery are substandard, if not actively dangerous, but any employee who complains is branded a "troublemaker" and treated accordingly.

Sales and Marketing

Five executives sat around a conference table, eyes fixed on the wide-screen television recessed into the wall at the front of the room. Onscreen, an endless loop of commercials ran, inexorably. A parade of athletes, dripping sweat and blood in luminescent colors, exerted themselves to the utmost again and again while a portentous voice-over urged consumers to discover whether they had the same stuff in them.

"Jesus," one of the executives breathed. "Why the hell didn't we think of this?"

"We did," said the man to his left, and everyone laughed.

Sales

Like its competition, King operates on a commission sales basis, with bonuses for product moved. Apart from those sales representatives who deal directly with large restaurant chains, each rep has a geographic territory and exclusive rights to deal with distributors within that territory. Of course, regulations to that effect are an open invitation to sales reps to try to poach each others' accounts, and a state of merry war exists in the home office's sales wing. Orders are routinely sabotaged or short-shipped, faxes are stolen, rolodexes are pillaged and various members of the sales department do their utmost to wreck their competitors' numbers while beefing up their own.

The sales model that King uses is an interesting one. Sales reps are rewarded more for moving units than they are for bringing in profit. Representatives who sell the most in a given period (quarterly races are always fierce, but holiday weekends are almost as competitive) are rewarded with bonuses. Those who lag are demoted to progressively less attractive territories while their expected numbers are upped.

Curiously enough, King's sales force is exclusively male, as the company fosters a nearly psychotic macho aggressiveness in its sales force. By some unfortunate accident, an entry-level Marketing exec named Melanie

Joe Six-Pack

"Joe Six-Pack" is liquor industry slang for the average beer drinker, the average member of what's called the "shot and a beer" demographic. Lower-end beers are marketed specifically at this fictional average. King, however, has taken this marketing concept and cynically taken it one step further: They've actually created an advertising campaign based around "Joe Six-Pack," who is portrayed as an average beer-drinking guy whose daily travails (cutting a deal with the neighbor to hide each other's tools so neither has to do any housework, creating "emergencies" around the house he has to attend to so he doesn't have to go shopping with his wife, refusing to get up from the couch to walk the dog until the poor animal opens the door himself in desperation, and so on) glorify utter beer-swilling slobbery. The ad campaign has taken off, and now King is making a fortune selling "Joe Six-Pack" T-shirts, mugs, keychains and the like. Sure, it's just a fad—but it's a fad glorifying laziness, deceit and above all, drinking a six pack of beer a day no matter what. And somehow, some way, some of that just might be sinking in.

Torres was assigned to Sales for a single fateful morning; by afternoon she was in Human Resources filing a half-dozen harassment complaints and by the next day she was "taking a leave of absence." She has not yet returned, and since that day the Sales department has had precisely zero female employees. This is just as well; even the best-mannered salesman inevitably succumbs to peer pressure in the intense environment.

To win the race for higher numbers, the salesmen resort to the single big gun in their arsenal: discounts. The deeper the discount offered, the more King a distributor can afford to buy, and the less room that same distributor has for anyone else's product on his shelves. And because the discounts are so deep, and the prices so low, few distributors can find a way to refuse loading up on various King products. The fact that those distributors can now afford to price King well below other brands also helps squeeze brands like Budweiser and Miller off the shelves, even though King routinely runs a distant seventh or worse in most independent taste tests of American beers.

Unfortunately for the bottom line, deeper discounts means smaller profits, and a higher percentage of each sale going to overhead. It's simple math; if you need to sell a hundred more cans of beer to make the same amount of money, you also have to pay for a hundred more cans to be made. Management's only dictum on this conundrum, however, is the mandate to sell even more beer and to make it up in volume. So the discounts go ever higher, as the number of units shipped increases and more and more King slides its way into stores.

Chains and Distributors

There are two sales representatives (turnover is so high in this position that an office wag has tacked a nameplate reading "Next!" on each appropriate desk) who deal strictly with restaurant and food service chains. Large food service chains such as ARA have exclusive contracts with dozens of stadiums and similar venues, meaning that they can put a frosty King in the mitts of up to 100,000 people at once. Here, as in the regular market, King operates by undercutting its competition so severely that buyers literally have no choice but to sign up — woe betide the purchasing agent who turns down an price that's a full 40% lower than the nearest competition's. Again, King's profit margin is pitifully slim, but by selling so much beer so cheaply, they squeeze out other brands and build customer loyalty among beer drinkers who like paying less.

As for restaurants, King is pushing hard to get exclusive contracts signed with nationwide and regional chains, making King the only beer available in those restaurants. Most are "family" or "American" styled restaurants, with fairly nondescript menus (every single one, for example, has a variation on the batter-fried onion) that are the same from franchise to franchise. In other words, these are restaurants where the customer knows what he's going to get, regardless of whether he's in Dubuque or Detroit, and that expectation is precisely why the customer keeps on going back. If King can make a nice, cool, refreshing King Lager part of that expectation, then the sky will be the limit for their influence — and coincidentally, for their bottom line.

Marketing

Compared to the driven, focused press gang that is the sales department, Marketing is a chaotic frenzy of weird ideas, massive budgets and bizarre implementations. Creative marketing is the key to capturing market share in the so-called "Beer Wars" — a successful ad campaign like the Budweiser frogs or King's own Joe Six-Pack can mean millions of dollars in sales, and millions of Americans talking about your product after seeing your commercials. Creating a catchphrase that gets repeated around water coolers and at sports bars is priceless exposure, which is why King has a disproportionate number of people working on precisely that.

Marketing's fields of endeavor break down into several smaller areas: Store promotions, television and print ads, contests and market research. The idea, at least as far as the employees know, is to make King the dominant company in the marketplace — to make it so that when Americans think of beer, they think of King.

Most of King's advertising revolves around a pseudo-medieval theme. Slogans such as "Thou Shalt Drink More Beer!" and "The King Commands Revels!" While the whole campaign is fairly cheesy (the actor who portrays "the King"

has clearly been sampling a bit too much of his kingdom's wares), it's good-natured, recognizable and fairly effective. Packaging, postering and the like are all done along the same theme, and King's had a minor but profitable sideline in sponsoring Renaissance Fests for the past several years as a result. Best of all, the whole thing is cheap, and that's something Jeremy King loves to hear.

The Hideous Truth

The real purpose, however, is something a little different. Rather than overtake Anheuser-Busch, Miller and other giants of the industry, King wants to bleed them dry. The idea is to make just enough of a marketing presence to force Budweiser *et alia* to overspend heavily to eradicate the King presence. In the short term, it works for the other companies. Besides Joe Six-Pack, most of King's other "special" campaigns — The Beerenstein Monster, a disastrous campaign with animatronic talking emus sitting around a bar and chatting in Australian accents as they sipped King, The Beer Gator, multiple series of ads with former athletes or musicians — have all been abject, expensive failures in that they haven't captured the public's imagination. On the other hand, they have forced the competition to spend exorbitant amounts of money combating each and every one of those campaigns, and to pour resources into marketing that might otherwise have gone into R&D, improving plant safety or assuaging environmental concerns.

The King's Wenches

Of course, you're not selling beer these days if you're not putting out posters, calendars and whatnot featuring scantily clad women who just happen to be holding a can of your product. King is no exception to this trend, though they've gone a little further over the top than most of their competitors. Specifically, King's has a troupe of models who collectively go by the *nom de stage* of "The King's Wenches." It's their job to show up at events King sponsors wearing their "uniform" — either a bondage/fantasy outfit with an extremely low cut bodice, or sheer, nearly see-through swimsuits, depending on the occasion — and try to avoid looking bored while the beer-crazed hordes ogle them.

To no one's surprise (except poor fools who think they've gotten lucky with a Wench), there are a smattering of Enticers who are rotated in and out of the Wenches' ranks on a regular basis. This serves to keep "fan" interest high, as King always makes a big deal over the debut of a new Wench, and it also helps the audience think they've got an honest chance with one of the Wenches once they get up close. That ensures huge crowds at any event where the Wenches are featured, for obvious reasons. Word of mouth on Wench personal appearances is very, very good indeed.

Target Markets Party Games

One of King's most successful marketing maneuvers of the past decade has been the "King's Laws of Partying" posters which have been given to distributors and retailers to hand out as freebies to their customers. The posters are targeted at (and particularly attractive to) college-aged beer drinkers, with good reason: They're simply formatted rules for a massive clutch of drinking games. At this point, a copy of King's Laws of Partying is considered a *sine qua non* for any frathouse basement; if nothing else, having the rules right there for Beer Pong (or whatever) saves the freshman pledges the embarrassment of having to admit they don't know what the hell their frat brothers are talking about half the time.

The logic behind The King's Laws of Partying is simple: Teach them how to play drinking games, and they'll drink more. If they drink more, profits go up (or at least volume does), and that means more of that ever-so-slightly tainted brew getting sucked down people's gullets. And since the various products on the King line are designed to produce heavy hangovers, then the rollover effect is more missed classes, fewer assignments done well (or done at all), more work missed, and generally more students spending more and more of their time sitting on the ratty couch in the basement slamming more six-packs of King. The process self-perpetuates, aided and abetted by "supplemental Laws" printed on the sides of special "King's Oktoberfest Brew" cans.

The fact that King's Oktoberfest Brew comes out in September, right when students are heading back to school, is not lost on watchdog groups who accuse the brewery of encouraging underage drinking and pandering to the student market. King's response has been the "Thou Shalt Drink Responsibly!" campaign, but sales on Oktoberfest have gone up every year since the line was introduced in 1996.

King and Politics

While there are plenty of companies who can be accused of mindless profit-taking and a lack of interest in the country around them, that charge cannot be leveled against King. In fact, King takes a keen interest in politics and spends heavily on the campaigns and politicians it supports.

On the other hand, not everyone is pleased with the sort of candidate King chooses to back. All are from the far right end of the political spectrum, ranging from conservative Republicans with anti-environmental agendas to the occasional fringe candidate from the American Socialist Workers Party (that's the American Nazi Party to the rest of us). All of the candidates that King backs are distinguishable for their extreme hard-line stance on environmental mat-

ters; one has even gone on record as saying that since the end of the world is coming, God would be disappointed if we hadn't used every last natural resource imaginable in the meanwhile. King supports these candidates to the legal limit (and beyond), and in return, once they get into office they busily start rolling back environmental regulations that cripple King's profitability.

While no one's ever caught King breaking campaign law or bribing an official in office, there's no question that there are any number of senators, congressmen and other officials who jump when Jeremy King says "frog." Unofficially, the contingent in Washington is known as "All the King's Men," which provokes much hilarity among the DC press corps, but which does nothing to hinder their effectiveness as a unified voting bloc.

King and the Environment

It behooves a beer company to show that it's about more than just swilling down fermented brews and piling up pyramids of cans. That's why King has spent a great deal of time and money letting everyone know about its AquaClear 2001 Foundation campaign, a crusade to clean up domestic waterways that have been fouled by industry. King is relentless in buying television ad time to extol the virtues of clean water and this program. Most of the spots feature Jeremy King, who adopts an "aw-shucks" outdoorsman persona while he earnestly tells the camera how important clean water is to King. In 1998, AquaClear 2001 Foundation commercials aired over 400 times. No one watching can come away anything but convinced that King is doing its part to help the environment.

The truth, as always, is a bit murkier. The AquaClear 2001 Foundation is entirely under King's thumb. Its chief administrator is Jeremy King. Its board of directors is comprised of members of the King family or their close business acquaintances. The field staff of the foundation is down to six, from eight the year before — both biochemists quit, and there has been no effort made to replace them. Overhead, which normally can run between 35% to 47% for a normal charity, is listed on the books at over 85%. Much of that goes to honoraria and travel expenses for the board. Salaries for Foundation staff, on the other hand, are well below average, meaning that not only does the organization have trouble attracting good people, it has trouble keeping them on staff once they arrive. Every expense, from office supplies to travel to actual testing equipment, must be cleared by the board, which is prone to micromanagement and denying requests seemingly at random.

In other words, there's not a whole lot getting done under the Foundation's auspices, but the marketing campaign has the public thoroughly convinced that AquaClear 2001 is a dynamic force for cleaning up the waterways of America. After all, they wouldn't be spend-

ing so much money on commercials if they weren't doing a fantastic job fighting pollution — or so the logic runs.

In plain English, the AquaClear 2001 Foundation is a sham. Its few remaining employees are fanatics who view themselves as the last, best hope for turning King onto a path of ecological correctness. What they don't realize is that they are kept on precisely for their fanaticism. It makes King look good in the eyes of liberals (who have consistently rejected the company's product for ideological reasons) to have one of their representatives ranting about the importance of the sticklebacks. In the meantime, they accomplish nothing but work hard to do it, and make King look good for its hypothetical support for the environment. In fact, a recent market study indicated that a growing percentage of consumers is picking up King precisely because they think doing so helps the environment. The irony is not lost on Corporate, which has ordered a whole new round of commercials for summer's prime beer drinking season.

The Hideous Truth

It should come as no shock that King's concern for clean water can only be described as "infinitesimal." What is surprising is the extent to which the company contributes to the very problem it claims to be so adamantly against. Brewing is not a "clean" industry, and it produces tremendous amounts of waste fluids. Most breweries purify these extras before dumping them into waterways. King doesn't, and the runoff from their main brewing plant is so foul as to poison everything up to 60 miles downstream. A brown film sits on the water while murkier things churn in the depths. No one's quite sure what's in there (even the AquaClear 2001 team couldn't identify some of the things they found) but what is there is toxic and long-lived. If the King plant stopped operation tomorrow, it would still take ten years of intensive cleanup to get the river pure enough to support fish again.

This hasn't escaped the notice of the Environmental Protection Agency and some newspapers and magazines, but there are certain roadblocks in place when going up against King in Colorado. For one thing, the company is one of the state's largest employers. That means that any sanctions against King hit the root of the state's economy, and that means that politicians are very leery of doing anything of that sort. For another, King does support many candidates heavily when it comes time for campaign contributions, and those individuals are not going to do anything to endanger their financial backing when the next election year rolls around. That means that environmental legislation that could impact King's operations gets gutted in committee, that EPA agents or local officials who make a stink about King's pollution get reassigned or dismissed and that anyone who wants to go up against King on its home turf first has to go through layers of very powerful people who want to protect their meal ticket.



The same goes for press coverage. Attack King in print, and you lose King advertising. Furthermore, you also lose the advertising of everyone who owes King a favor. You lose the patronage of King employees — and yes, there are checkpoints at the entrance and exit of the plant where Security checks bags for “shrinkage” and coincidentally keeps tabs on what people are bringing into and out of the plant. You lose distribution, as chains that owe King favors stop carrying your magazine. And if you persist even after all that, King hauls you into court and keeps the ball rolling there until you can’t afford the legal fees any more and are forced to settle.

The end result is that King can do pretty much what it likes — which is a great deal indeed — and not get called to task for it. It’s a very favorable arrangement, and one King intends to continue for as long as possible.

Smaller Firms

King has multiple companies under its umbrella, each targeted at a specific market niche as well as playing a role in the broader overall plan. Most of the branches of the King corporate tree have little or nothing to do with one another, and many employees of, say, Dragon Valley Wines don’t even know that they have a corporate link to Thaw Beverages. In the meantime, however, King has a diversified group of companies under its aegis that have international reach and perhaps, global consequences.

King Spirits

Hal was falling asleep on his feet as the man in front of him rambled on about single malts, double malts, century malts and, for all he knew, malted milk. The bastard had latched onto Hal at the beginning of the party for the sole purpose of proclaiming his brand of scotch inferior, apparently, and for the last hour and a half Hal had been unable to shake him loose.

If he didn’t fall asleep, Hal figured, he’d have to deck the guy just to get away.

“...you see, the Ila really has a much smoother taste, but the Oban is in all other ways superior. Don’t you agree?”

With an effort, Hal focused. The annoying little man was standing there, glass out and smug smile on his face, daring Hal to contradict him. Well, fuck it, Hal thought. If he’s daring me to...

“Listen, pal, you know what I drink? I drink King. You know why I drink it? Because it gets me fucked up so fast and so hard that I can even stand to listen to a little thumbdick like you for an hour. So keep talking. Me? I’m getting another glass of my scotch.”

He stomped off to the bar, leaving the little man behind in stunned amazement and, blessedly, silence.

King Spirits is the hard liquor branch of the King conglomerate, though they’ve pretty much ceded the vodka market to Ruskaiya. Also located in Colorado, about five

miles from the main brewery, King Spirits is a smaller operation, but just as busy a one.

King concentrates on the harder liquors — whiskeys, gin and the like. There are no liqueurs or other low-proof beverages made here, as Jeremy King squashes the notion himself every time it gets proposed. So in the meantime, King sticks to harsh, heavy drinks, and deliberately cultivates a reputation as a distiller of the sort of alcohol a real man drinks.

With low price points on all of their products (not surprising, considering the poor quality of ingredients and otherwise low overhead), King moves a great deal of distilled spirits, especially to underage drinkers and less affluent customers. King Gin, for example, is literally priced at 40% of Tanqueray’s equivalent product; that means that anyone looking for a cheap buzz heads straight for the King section of the shelf. This means that the higher-end market eludes King, but that’s not who King is after here.

The Hideous Truth

King Spirits doesn’t have a concrete goal the way Ten Tickle or Dragon Valley does. Rather, it’s a giant playground and laboratory. Whatever is going to go into the bottles at another King company first gets tested out on King Spirits. If it works here, it will work anywhere — and it cuts down on that pesky market research and field testing. So Banes are put into one batch here, and those bottles’ eventual destination is noted and observed. Teratogens go into a batch of everclear over there, and again, the product’s progress is monitored. So it goes; King has found a way to turn research into profit, though not in a sense that outside investors would necessarily understand.

Personnel

Adam Rozier is the Plant Manger for King Spirits, and he’s the one who keeps track of what’s going into which batch of what type of booze. Rozier is actually a King by marriage, though his wife is a great deal smarter than he is and essentially operates the plant through him. Rozier is a balding, slightly paunchy man with a look of perpetual surprise on his face but a spreadsheet-quality memory for what’s where. Within his limited field of expertise he’s brilliant, but otherwise he’s completely lost without his wife. The longer he’s away from her, the more pliable he becomes, which could be very useful for anyone wanting to learn the plant’s secrets.

King Import Company

The table that the camera was panning around had six glasses of beer on it. Five were the pale yellow of mass-produced American lager, but the sixth was a deep, almost luminous red. “Red means danger,” murmured a deep voice that sounded better suited to doing football highlight reels. “Red means excitement. Red means adventure. Red means that you’re supposed to stop.”

The camera jerked to a halt abruptly, focusing on that single glass of red beer. "But you're not going to stop, are you?" A hand reached in and lifted the glass up. Off-camera, sounds of drinking and a satisfied "Ahhhhh" could be heard, then the now-empty glass was replaced on the table with an audible clank.

"Kiley's Red. In case you feel like starting where everyone else stops."

Based out of Norwalk, Connecticut, King Imports is responsible for bringing some of the world's finest beers to the United States. Brews previously only available in Ireland, Jamaica, China and West Africa can now be found on package store shelves across the country, thanks to the tireless efforts of King Imports' staff. If it's a good beer, King will find a way to get it into the USA, regardless of tariffs, import restrictions or anything else standing in the way. If beer were all that King brought into the country, they'd be a credit to corporate America and deserving of the praise heaped upon them by beer aficionados from sea to shining sea.

Unfortunately, that's not the case.

Founded in 1992 to combat the success of beers like Guinness and Harp, King Imports doesn't actually brew any beer. A spin-off staffed entirely with long-time King employees, the company instead does its best to bring the most flavorful — or at least the best recognized — beers from around the world to America under their aegis. Arrangements vary, but usually King sets up a strict importing and exclusivity arrangement that means they're the only ones legally permitted to bring that beer into the country. Any violation means legal war, which usually ends with the brewer resting firmly under King's heavy thumb.

On rarer occasions, King licenses exclusivity and the right to produce beer with the import's label domestically. The most successful arrangement of this sort has been Kiley's Red and Kiley's Gold, a pair of Irish beers manufactured in Colorado at the main King plant. Kiley's is marketed as an import, though anyone reading the fine print on the bottle quickly discovers the beer's shameful secret.

Most of King Imports' shipping operations are run out of New York and San Diego, where other Pentex operations have warehousing and distribution centers; sharing space cuts overhead all across the chain. The other benefits of this arrangement are obvious; shared space means it's that much easier for King to smuggle in things for other branches of the conglomerate. After all, who's going to inspect a shipping container of beer for toxic waste? When King's feeling particularly paranoid, it just puts the stuff in the bottles.

The Hideous Truth

King Import Company does in fact import beer. The company imports a lot of it, very profitably and very well. Furthermore, the beers it imports are generally excellent

(with the noticeable exception of the Kiley's brews) and make up for a multitude of King's sins, at least in the eyes of serious beer drinkers.

There's a lot of other things that come in with King's various imported beers, however. Banned chemicals that are against international regulation to import or export. Live animal and plant specimens, often rare or toxic, that get shipped through to avoid regulation or mandatory quarantine periods (and more than one new pathogen has come vectoring out of a King's warehouse). More obscure cargo, ranging from staked vampires to monstrous eggs that have not yet hatched. All of these can be found stashed into shipments destined for King Imports, to be offloaded and redirected to other Pentex companies.

While King isn't the largest import concern affiliated with Pentex, it's the one that draws the least attention from outsiders. That's why it's the perfect choice to handle the most sensitive cargo. While King doesn't have any customs agents in its pocket, it does have friendly working relationships with any number of them in both New York and San Diego, and gifts of free product (especially the expensive stuff from Ireland or China) work wonders in making sure no one looks too closely at what King's shipping.

Personnel

The heart of King Imports' operations is the company's head, Julia Lindelle. Like so many of the presidents of King's subordinate companies, Julia is not quite human, though all of her employees are. Instead, she's a corrupted Corax, whose unique talents for finding secrets and rarities serve her equally well bringing in new beers and thousand-year old artifacts from the ruined cities of Mali. Lindelle spends much of her time in the field, but is in constant communication with the home office through a variety of electronic media. Few of her employees know what continent she's on from day to day, but she always seems to know what they're up to, and she doesn't tolerate slackers. She also has a squad of hand-picked teamsters on each coast who handle the delicate aspects of the shipping operation. All are loyal to her personally, and have no qualms about doing whatever's necessary to make sure that things continue to run very smoothly indeed.

The one other individual without whom King Imports could not function at all is the firm's accountant, Carl Bailor. While Bailor costs the firm as much in Kiley's Red as he does in salary, he's also a wizard at doctoring invoices and juggling numbers so that it doesn't look like a barrel of curare derivative came in with the latest batch of Cerveza Regina. Bailor is on the far side of forty, with sandy hair and a pot belly that's a direct result of too much product sampling during long nights at the office. He does what he does out of a sense of personal loyalty to Lindelle that verges on erotic obsession; he doesn't care in the slightest about what he's covering up for as long as she's the one asking him to do it.

Ruskaiya Distilleries

"This tastes like crap." Mary made a face that sent the rest of the room into gales of laughter. "Who bought this shit?"

On the sofa opposite, a teenager with a slightly puffy face raised a glass filled with vodka and orange juice. "Yo, Mary. What do you expect for 11 bucks to the bottle? You want good stuff, you gotta give me more money to get it with." Someone wadded up a single and threw it at him. He caught it, grinning, and managed to spill half his drink in the process.

"The hell with that. If you're gonna get the cheap crap, make sure you get the good cheap crap." Mary picked up the bottle from the counter in front of her. The label read "Tsarina," and showed an image of an overdeveloped woman in what some artist presumably thought was Russian imperial garb. It looked like the cover of a bad fantasy novel. "Jesus, Ray, you really had to go for the bottom of the barrel, didn't you?"

"It don't make no difference, Mary. They all taste like crap."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

Those who can appreciate fine vodka can generally agree on one thing: If it's domestic, it's best used for cleaning battery terminals. While Finland and Russia send vodkas of remarkable quality to the United States, America has yet to produce a truly great vodka. Some of this unfortunate state of affairs is bad luck and some of it is simply circumstance. A great deal of it, however, can be laid at the feet of Ruskaiya Distilleries.

Ruskaiya is located in Somerville, Massachusetts, in a nondescript brick building within a stone's throw of the Bunker Hill monument. It's been there, in one form or another, since Prohibition ended (and even before). Somerville has always been a blue-collar town, at one point boasting the highest population density in New England, and the men who lived and worked there liked their vodka. Ruskaiya catered to their tastes by producing booze that was strong and more importantly, cheap. As Somerville's industry moved away, Ruskaiya changed its business. Instead of just selling locally, they became a bottler, selling their product under other companies' names and labels. For the past two decades, any time you've bought Tsarina brand vodka, or Kiev brand, or Cossack, or any of the brands that are that much more affordable than Smirnoff or Finlandia, you've bought Ruskaiya.

That business, in the end, is what attracted King to Ruskaiya. It's not that Ruskaiya makes vodka. King Distilleries makes vodka, too, and with a little effort could churn out more than Ruskaiya could ever imagine producing. Instead, the company's appeal lay in its broad distribution network and relative anonymity. After all, it wasn't as if Ruskaiya's customers were trumpeting from the rooftops the fact that they had someone else's hooch in their bottles. So Ruskaiya gets everywhere, unnoticed, and that's exactly what King wants.

The Hideous Truth

So what is the hideous secret behind Ruskaiya's operations? At the moment, absolutely nothing. That's what's so terrifying about them. They're an ace in the hole, a card waiting to be played. While there's nothing terribly benevolent about their current business — rotgut is rotgut, no matter what label's on the bottle — there's nothing actively malevolent about it. Instead, Ruskaiya just sells to more and more customers, and winds up in more and more bottles, until the shelves positively overflow with their product. The more repackaged Ruskaiya there is on the shelves, the more likely it is that customers end up with the company's product no matter which "brand" they choose.

And that means that when Corporate — or Corporate's shadowy masters — decide that it's time to put something in all that vodka, there's going to be no way of stopping it.

Personnel

Ruskaiya operates a full-scale distillery that works three shifts round the clock, plus a small shipping operation. There are 220 employees who draw their paychecks from the company in one fashion or another. The vast majority work in the distillery itself, or in the affiliated bottling and warehousing departments. The executive offices, which house a much smaller staff, are located in an annex of the distillery itself.

Inside the Distillery

Vodka is one of the oldest distilled spirits, and one of the easiest to manufacture. That being said, if Ruskaiya has made any improvements to its physical plant in the past three decades, the company has hidden them with remarkable cunning. The distillation equipment was put in during the 1950s and has barely been graced with routine maintenance, let alone upgrades, since then. Pipes shudder and creak, ruptures are common events and it's not uncommon for half the equipment to be off line at a given time. Temporary patches and fixes become permanent because there's no budget and no time to effect better repairs. In short, the entire plant is a cramped, crowded antique filled with overheated, worn-out equipment, dangerous fumes and overworked men. For all that, it does manage to churn out a remarkable amount of vodka, but at the cost of innumerable breakdowns and accidents.

To outsiders, the distillation operation is an impenetrable maze of towering machines, scalding hot pipes, walkways and steam. Anyone wandering around on the floor without a guide is liable to get lost in seconds, and there are all sorts of tools and bits of equipment available to make a trespasser's life miserable and brief if necessary.

Perhaps the most important key to Ruskaiya's success is its Sales Director, Mikhail Chary. Chary is a bearded, mustachioed man of Russian descent (he drops into an almost-believable accent when the situation demands) whose specialty is selling his product for other people's bottles. While the direct sales of Ruskaiya have suffered during Chary's tenure as Sales Director, the expansion of the company's other business has been both remarkable and sustainable. Chary is a superb salesman, and it's his prowess, more than anything else, that lets King continue to put Ruskaiya vodka underneath everyone else's labels.

While Chary is quite human, he's not exactly a shining example of the species. His usual negotiating tactics involve anything from subtle threats to not-so-subtle ones to finding a way to obtain compromising pictures of his opposite number across the negotiating table. Sooner or later, however, they all sign on and Chary reaps a nice, fat commission.

Corporate has noticed Chary's success and is intrigued. They're currently making overtures to him to see if he wants to start climbing the ladder to Denver, and so far he's been receptive. Of course, Chary has no idea what's waiting for him if he does make the jump, but that little revelation hasn't been mentioned as part of the proposed bonus package.

Thaw Beverages

"Scotch and soda, James?" Deveraux took two glasses off of the bar and gestured vaguely with them at his guest.

"Don't mind if I do," said his friend, who was instead looking out the bay window at the ocean below. "Marvelous place you've got here, Derek. Absolutely marvelous."

"Thanks; only took half my life to get it." There was the sound of bottlecaps cracking off, and then the comforting gurgle of scotch flowing over ice.

"Well, it was worth it." James Holton took a few steps toward the glass and gazed out at the water in rapt attention. "Whatever you did to get this place, it was worth it."

Deveraux chuckled as he walked over to his friend, full glasses in hand. "Don't ask me any questions and you won't have to testify." The two men shared a laugh as Holton took his glass and lifted it up to the light.

"Damn. What did you put in this, Derek? An Alka-Seltzer?"

"Not at all." Deveraux sipped his drink with an expert's appreciation. "Just the soda. It's got some fizz to it, that's all."

"Some fizz indeed," said Holton unhappily, but he, too lifted the tumbler to his lips. "Salud, my friend."

Deveraux smiled back at him. "Salud."

Thaw Beverages is the rarest of rare aves: A King company that's getting the pants beaten off of it in the



marketplace. Simply put, Canada Dry and Schweppes do everything Thaw does and do it better. Thaw has steadily lost market share for six years running, and if it weren't for the activators in the mixers designed to work with other King products, Corporate would no doubt have pulled the plug already. In the meantime, however, that means that the employees at Thaw know they're on the chopping block. They know their livelihoods are hanging by a thread. And they're willing to do absolutely anything at all to preserve them.

King started Thaw in 1979, in an effort to cash in on the diet soda craze. While the various diet products Thaw produced — Diet Thaw, Thaw Free and Summer Thaw — crashed and burned, the sideline products, such as club soda and tonic water, took off. Corporate noticed, reshuffled Thaw's focus and organization, and turned the company into a manufacturer of mixers to go along with the spirits coming out of King Distilleries. The marketing synergy created boosted Thaw sales nicely, and for a decade the company was a steady profit engine for King. With the dawn of the 90s, however, Thaw's status in the market has been eroded steadily by a renewed assault by Schweppes, Seagrams and the like. Now the company is hanging on by a thread, but that doesn't mean its management isn't dreaming of a big comeback.

The Hideous Truth

One would think it would be hard to work much evil with club soda. After all, it's just carbonated water. There's not much room for villainy or corruption to hide. Under normal circumstances, this would certainly be the case, but the remaining employees at Thaw know these are not normal times. That's why they've managed to outdo themselves in cooking up something particularly vile.

Thaw's deep dark secret is in its bubbles, specifically the unique and patented carbonation process used on all Thaw sodas. While the procedure does force carbon dioxide into the liquid, as with any carbonation process, Thaw's system also inserts something else. Something unpleasant.

Specifically, the hyperactive carbonation Thaw inflicts on its beverages (market research studies showed that one of the major reasons consumers were turning away from the brand was the fact that every time they opened a bottle of Thaw, roughly a third of the contents would foam over) doesn't do anything by itself. It is, however, carefully calculated to enrage, irritate and otherwise activate any Banes exposed to it, meaning that anyone even slightly Bane-infested who sips at a glass of Thaw Ginger Ale is accelerating the process of his own damnation.

However, that's not the sort of thing that's going to win Thaw back any customers, so certain employees have gotten a bit more proactive. Specifically, they've taken it upon themselves to make some room in the marketplace. In simpler terms, Thaw's competitors have experienced a rash of industrial sabotage of late, everything from batches

Who Knows?

Most of the employees of Thaw, from the lowliest stockboy to the majority of executives, have no idea that they're selling anything except soda. The unusual degree of carbonation? That's just what makes Thaw beverages special; they even have a marketing campaign built around it.

The only employees who actually know that there's something else going on with the soda — as opposed to the ones who've taken it on themselves to sabotage the competition — are Jeff Flieder and the head of R&D, Dr. Elspeth Bray. Accountants who ask why certain expensive ingredients are being purchased in bulk are threatened or fired. Research assistants who wonder aloud as to why such inefficient processes and unwieldy recipes are necessary are told to shut up, mind their own business or get their resumes ready. Anyone who mentions these anomalies outside the company gets slammed with lawsuits — the non-disclosure which all employees have to sign is ironclad — or “visited” by a few friends of Flieder's from Corporate's manpower pool.

Flieder's motivation in this is reasonably clear; he's not quite himself any more, and somehow he's gotten the notion that mucking about with his customers will encourage them to drink more Thaw. Bray, it would seem, is operating from a combination of corporate loyalty — she's a Pentex lifer privy to some of the corporation's most basic aims — and twisted scientific curiosity. The taste test surveys that Thaw sends out into the field are half-designed by Bray herself, so she can get a handle on what exactly her concoctions are doing to their purchasers.

of soda being contaminated to powdered glass being dumped into unfilled bottles. Thus far, the other companies have been able to hush up the incidents. That just means that the overly energetic Thaw employees are just going to have to get serious.

Personnel

The core of the Thaw team is all that's left from the glory days of the late 1980s. The company's president, Jeff Flieder, is a thin, nervous man with a bad case of the worms. He's constantly popping stomach tablets and washing them down with Thaw Club Soda, which isn't helping his condition any. Flieder is the constant target of abuse from Corporate, which he turns around and gives to his subordinates. Under normal circumstances, they'd quit en masse, but these are not normal circumstances. Word has gotten around the rest of the industry that former Thaw employees are a little...odd, and as such they're essentially unemployable. That means they need to stick it out at Thaw, but with resentment against both Flieder and the competition bubbling just beneath the surface it makes for a tense, poisonous environment.

Flieder himself was a decent sort once, but that was 15 years ago. Now he's an erratic, vicious sort, prone to fits of screaming and sudden dashes for the executive washroom (so he can deliver his daily dose of worms). Other, more subtle changes are at work in him as well, but as yet they haven't manifested — at least not where there were any witnesses.

Dragon Valley Wines

Two men stood and watched the sun set over what seemed to be endless rows of grapevines. The plants were lush and heavy with fruit, and the last rays of the setting sun made them appear almost luminous. The sky was a darkening blue, unbroken by clouds anywhere from horizon to horizon. The tableau was perfect, and the men watched it in silent admiration until the sun slipped below the horizon and the spell was broken.

"Beautiful crop this year, Earl," said the shorter of the two men, and his companion nodded. "Rich, sweet, lot of sugar in those. This is going to be our best year in a very long time."

"Yup." Earl rubbed his eyes, his hands weathered from years working with the soil. "Going to be one hell of a crop. You know what that means?"

The other man nodded. "Mmm-hmm. Means I have to spray tomorrow again, doesn't it?"

"That's exactly right, son," said Earl. "You got that exactly right."

Dragon Valley Wines was until recently a small vineyard in California's Napa Valley that sold primarily within California and nowhere else. All that changed when the Pentex money came flooding in via King, which bought Dragon Valley out, expanded it and turned it into a major player in the mid-range domestic wine industry. With King's marketing muscle behind it, Dragon Valley was able to break the formerly tight distribution network, and now it's sold coast to coast as competition for Fetzer, Kendall-Jackson and other affordable domestic wines. At a surprisingly low \$8-\$12 a bottle, Dragon Valley has become a favorite of the graduate student and twentysomething dinner party scene, and it has garnered surprisingly good reviews from any number of industry publications.

Recently, Dragon Valley has snapped up even more real estate, and has been producing a slightly wider variety of vintages. Contrary to what one might expect, they're not responsible for "wine in a box," but they have been quietly exploring the lower end of the market through alternate brand names. While the Dragon Valley vintages are of a uniform high quality, the sub-labels — Deer Hall, which is a "jug" wine, and Pyrrhus, a series of fruit-flavored beverages akin to a Boone's Farm or a Mad Dog 20/20 — are gleeful crap made from the leftovers of the original wine-making process.

The Hideous Truth

The secret to Dragon Valley isn't in the bottles. It's in the grapes — or more accurately, in the vines. While

grapevines are aggressive climbers, normally there are limits to their growth and size. Not so with the particular breeds that Dragon Valley grows. Those vines are a trifle more aggressive than their normal, taint-free kin. They grow with astonishing speed, producing bunches of bloody red grapes with sharp-edged seeds. Even the white grapes have a distinct rosé tinge to them that some experts have tried to attribute to excess iron in the Dragon Valley soil. The speed at which the Dragon Valley vines grow allows the winery to get its crop in earlier than any of the surrounding vineyards, which means that they're generally first to market as well.

But speed of growth isn't the only thing that's odd about the Dragon Valley vines. They're, for lack of a better word, hungry. They'll burrow into the ground, for hundreds of yards, if necessary, and emerge in a new spot. If they find another vine — say, by snaking underground across the property line and into another vineyard — Dragon Valley vines will strangle and replace those vines. If they find water, they'll drain it dry. And visitors have noticed that there don't seem to be too many insects, or even small animals at the Dragon Valley compound.

That unwholesome vitality doesn't just stay in the vines, however. It manifests in the fruit as well. Dragon Valley grapes are unusual in that despite being large, they have an almost disturbingly high sugar content. They also

Pyrrhus

At the moment, there are a bare half-dozen flavors of Pyrrhus, all of which come in brightly colored bottles with the image of the legendary son of Achilles on the front. The actual Pyrrhus beverages have exceedingly high sugar and alcohol content and not much else, despite the claim of real fruit juice on the labels. Reliable (and sober) observers who have tried it have described it as "bug juice with booze in it," but that suits the vintage's supporters just fine.

While one might expect Pyrrhus to be positively swimming in Banes or other foulness, that's not the case — at least, not above and beyond the rather dubious nature of the beverage itself. Instead, the combination of sugar, alcohol and a mild euphoric blended in make anyone who drinks the stuff stand out to ambient Banes and suchlike as an easy target. Furthermore, the combination serves to lower the resistance to possession of anyone drinking the stuff. While generally a drinker of Pyrrhus is only temporarily possessed as a result of imbibing, during his hours of possession he will act in whatever manner the possessing spirit deems appropriate. The only certainty is that bystanders are going to see something bizarre and probably dangerous.

If the victim is lucky enough to survive, he can write it off as the alcohol, but that's assuming he survives — which isn't always a wise assumption to make.

The Vines

The phrase "Dragon Valley vines" is something of a misnomer. There's only one vine, really, reaching up from who knows where down deep in the bowels of the earth. Sure, it's split itself into multiple plants, separated itself into fragments for the sake of camouflage and expansion, but if you trace the thinnest roots down deep enough, you'll find they all end in the same place. Of course, tracing the roots all the way down isn't necessarily a good idea. The vines don't take kindly to anyone poking around in their soil, and generally take steps to prevent that sort of thing.

Most of the time, the vines take half-steps to disguise their nature. That is, they don't do anything too far out of the ordinary, but they do seem to take an unholy delight in making observers nervous. They'll rustle when there's no wind, shift position when someone's back is turned and in all ways try to set observers on edge. But should anyone get close and try to figure out what's really going on, the vines play coy and act perfectly vegetative.

Then again, if anyone really starts investigating the vines, it's dead certain that Earl, John and Marcel will come calling, armed with shotguns and loaded for bear. The Weedens know how to hunt Garou, too, though they're not quite sure where the knowledge came from.

Anyone eating a grape from a Dragon Valley vine had better make very sure he spits the seeds out. If he doesn't, the seed will attach itself to his stomach wall and begin to germinate. Within a year, the poor fool will be in the same condition that the younger Weedens are in, with the vines running through them and subtly controlling everything they do. After five or so years of being animated by the vines this way, the victim wanders out into the fields and lays down to die. From his body sprouts a whole new set of vines, which reach downward to join with their unholy parent,

and upward to start the cycle again. Once the vines have been in place a full year it is impossible to remove them without killing the patient, while careful surgery just might do the trick before that critical stage.

If the vines are attacked, they defend themselves with uncommon ferocity. Standard tactics involve whipping vines around attackers' ankles to haul them bodily to the ground, then going to work with roots and runners from above and below. The vines and roots are capable of burrowing into the flesh of a victim at the rate of one Health Level per turn on a successful Dexterity + Brawl roll (difficulty 6), though if the target is being held down by other vines the difficulty drops to 3. The vines are firm believers in overkill, and will bring as many tendrils to the fray as they can to ensure their own safety. Should a Garou be foolish enough to wander into the middle of the vineyard before he starts investigating, he can expect to be beset by literally hundreds of the vines. Fire does make the vines draw back, though if the situation is desperate enough, the tendrils will sacrifice themselves to smother a torch or other flame.

The vines do have more than one combat tactic, however. They are fond of strangulation when they can get away with it, which is entirely too often. On rarer occasions, however, the vines trip and hold down a victim, then lower fat, ripe grapes into his mouth, then let him go. The unlucky soul wanders off, free—at least until such time as the seeds he's swallowed start to grow.

Physical: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 4

Mental: Perception 4, Intelligence 1, Wits 4 (for sake of combat only)

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 5, Empathy 3

have something else, a concentrated distillate of the same unhealthy energy that animates the vines. Even the fermentation process can't annihilate that, and it goes into the wine as well.

Unsurprisingly, any sort of active ingredient urging unrestrained growth has a detrimental effect on the human organism, and the roiling substance in Dragon Valley Wines is no exception. Once imbibed, it encourages the same sort of unrestrained growth in humans that it did in the vines. Regular drinkers of Dragon Valley vintages often report that they feel younger, that they lose weight and occasionally they even start getting their hair back. Alas, the piper must be paid; the price for all of this renewed vitality is extracted on the cellular level, with markedly increased incidences of cancer. As more and more Dragon Valley drinkers are diagnosed with stomach and liver cancers, the risk that the true culprit will be

identified grows—but ever so slowly. After all, everyone knows that wine's not a carcinogen, right?

Right.

Personnel

The most important man at Dragon Valley is Earl Weeden, or at least he would be if he were a man at all. Unfortunately, he isn't and hasn't been for several years—not since the King buyout. Whatever's into the vines got into him, too. More accurately, the vines are into him—they burrowed up through the soles of his feet years ago and got inside, and now whatever animates them moves him as well. Oh, he still looks and sounds like a man, but he goes barefoot on the soil whenever he can, and if you listen carefully when he talks, you can hear the rustle of wind through leaves.

Earl runs things at Dragon Valley, planning everything from planting times to what sort of wood's going to be used for the barrels. Lately his decisions have gotten a little more erratic, but that's just the vines talking to him, and who knows the wine better than they do. Under ordinary circumstances, his two sons, John and Marcel might protest — but they've got the vines in them, too.

Ten Tickle Ales

Over three centuries ago, Willem Ten Tickle came to New Amsterdam — modern New York — from his home in Rotterdam. He brought his family, his belongings and, most precious of all, his centuries-old recipe for fine beer. For decades Ten Tickle Ales were renowned as the finest to be had in the entire New World — but then Willem died, and his recipe vanished into the mists of time. For three hundred years, the secret of the famous Ten Tickle brews were lost to the world, and mourned by only a few beer connoisseurs.

Until now. Through a combination of diligent research, love for fine beers and a little bit of luck, we here at Ten Tickle Ales have been able to find the original recipes used by that original master brewer. Even better, we've been able to put them into use so that you, too can enjoy the taste of an ice-cold, delicious Ten Tickle Brew just the way Willem himself might have, all those years ago.

Here's hoping you enjoy drinking it as much as we enjoy brewing it.

— From the label of a bottle of "Ten Tickle's Rip Van Winkle Ale"

Ten Tickle Ales is an experiment for King in more ways than one. For one thing, it's the company's first tentative step into the microbrew market, which has steadily eroded the profits of the larger manufacturers for years. There is a real panic at Corporate that despite all of their best efforts, the burgeoning microbrew explosion in the marketplace will render all their efforts useless. It will do them no good to chew up Anheuser-Busch's market share if they're losing their own to Sam Adams at the same rate, after all.

The second area of concern is that no one affiliated with King has tried to brew good beer in literally decades. With the microbrew market so fiercely competitive, a single misstep could spell the end of the venture. That's why Corporate is nervous, and why they're handling the operation with kid gloves.

Operations and History

There really was a Willem Ten Tickle, or actually a Willem Ten Tickyll who came over to the New Amsterdam colony and he really was a brewer. However, that's where the resemblance to the official story King promulgates ends. Ten Tickyll fled Rotterdam one step ahead of the authorities, who even in those relatively lax times had no use for someone with a reputation as foul as "Wizard Willem's." So to New Amsterdam he came, where he set up shop in the

The Ten Tickle Pledge of Quality

Every bottle of Ten Tickle Ale, whether it be the highly rated Cherry Lambic or the still-in-development Pumpkin Pie Ale, has a label with the Ten Tickle story (quoted above) on the back, and a picture of Willem Ten Tickyll himself, arms crossed and sardonic grin in place, on the front. Depending on the type of brew the bottle contains, Ten Tickyll's image is appropriately decked out — a Santa hat for Christmas Wassail Ale, a baseball cap for Summerbrew, and so on. Careful observers of the picture, however, will notice a few disturbing details. Ten Tickyll (the portrait is from an original, rescued from an estate sale entirely by accident; the picture had somehow gotten another one framed over it) has but a single thick, bushy eyebrow, which he apparently took no pains to pluck or groom. Furthermore, his ring fingers are visibly longer than his middle fingers.

In centuries past, both of these traits would have been considered clear proof that Ten Tickyll was a werewolf. While there is no evidence that Wizard Willem was a Black Spiral Dancer, there's also no evidence against it. A more likely scenario is that he was Kinfolk, and that he was very, very good at what he did.

Hudson Valley as a brewer of all sorts of things, beer being only a sideline to pay the bills. His beer recipes aren't bad, certainly, but they're nothing for the ages. They do have two things going for them, however. First of all, they have the cachet of being old, which some people are always willing to confuse with being good. The other is that they were bundled along with any number of Ten Tickyll's other recipes, which included various poisons, potions and other, less savory substances. Those formulae are being put to work elsewhere in the Pentex hierarchy, but the "waste not, want not" mentality came into play, which meant that when King started up a microbrewery, the recipes they used for the beer were old Willem's.

Today, Ten Tickle Ales is based out of West Warwick, Rhode Island, approximately 20 minutes from Providence. The offices, plant and warehouse are all located on the same site, with the staff of 14 handling everything from brewing to accounting to packing and shipping. King handles marketing and distribution for Ten Tickle through King Imports; the ownership link is kept as quiet as possible. While any number of major breweries own total or partial interest in assorted microbreweries, drinkers of microbrews prefer their illusions, and it's best to keep links of that sort quiet for the sake of the bottom line.

For the moment, Ten Tickle is sticking to the standard distribution pattern for a small microbrew. To wit, King is carefully keeping the various Ten Tickle products available in New England and the northeast only, as a microbrew that

gets too much distribution, too fast, raises eyebrows. Instead, it's better to gain local cachet and let word of mouth spread, so that beer drinkers in California are clamoring to distributors to pick up the latest hot thing. After that, it's only a matter of time before Ten Tickle are everywhere in the United States, while serious beer snobs can take pride in having "discovered" the various brews.

The Ugly Truth

All of the hideous things one might expect of King Breweries? They're true of Ten Tickle Ales. King has very deliberately marketed Ten Tickle at the beer snob market, eschewing flash and glamour for a subtler method of seduction. Quiet voice-overs, read by an actor who implies descent from the original Willem Ten Tickell himself, form the bulk of the microbrewery's ads. The idea is to convince potential drinkers that they are in fact better than the ruck and run of boozers out there, and that their elevated tastes deserve a better (and coincidentally much more expensive) product. After all, anyone can drink King's Lager; it's just \$8.99 for the case. It takes a truly experienced palate, however, to demand a beer (say, Ten Tickle SummerBrew) that goes for nearly the same amount per six-pack — and a heck of a marketing campaign to convince drinkers that the relatively small upgrade in taste is worth the extra dinero.

Regardless, King's marketing for Ten Tickle plays heavily on the egotism of its core market, harping on the fact that they're better, smarter and more tasteful. Of course, the beer itself is formulated to reinforce this puffed-up sense of self-importance, making Ten Tickle drinkers ever more arrogant and ever more intent on proselytizing for their favorite beverage. The whole cycle is self-reinforcing, to the point where sooner or later Ten Tickle snobs don't even want to go out to have a cold one; they'd rather stay at home, and savor their perfect brews in privacy. And that's when Willem's secret ingredients finally start to kick in....

Personnel

Ten Tickle is a small operation, but there are a few essential personnel without whom the entire business would crumble. Chief among them is Alfonse Michaud, a Quebecois expatriate and the president of Ten Tickle Ales. Curiously enough, Michaud did not come up through the ranks at King. Rather, he left Quebec in 1992 after a few brushes with the law (rumor has it that he was perhaps a bit too energetic in helping the cause of an independent Quebec), came to Rhode Island and spent several fruitless years trying to start up a microbrewery of one stripe or another. His efforts came to the attention of Corporate right around the time the King family decided that it was time to get into the niche beer market, and they bought him out lock, stock and barrel.

Michaud frankly doesn't care that he's sold his soul along with his operation; he's finally got money, a successful product and even adoring fans. Part of the terms of the sale

were that he leave the brewing to a brewmaster King was going to bring in and instead concentrate on business affairs. So far it's worked out well, in part because Michaud buys into the hype surrounding Ten Tickell's recipe, and partially because he's been promised bigger and better things by Corporate if he plays along.

Michaud is fiercely protective of his beers, his employees and his company. While he's not *fomori* yet, he's well on his way. Any insinuation that there might possibly be something wrong with his precious beer drives him into a fury, and more than one of the "complimentary tours" Ten Tickle offers of its brewery have been interrupted by a Michaud rant. Furthermore, while no one knows exactly what Alfonse did before he came to America, it clearly involved combat training of some sort, as the man is strong as an ox and knows how to fight as well.

The second vital cog in the Ten Tickle machine is Josh Estes, the brewmaster. Estes was brought in to work with the Ten Tickell recipes from King's larger R&D department, and he brings a wealth of brewing knowledge with him. He brings a mile-wide sadistic streak as well, unfortunately, but his coworkers — those whom he doesn't drive off — chalk it up to an "artistic temperament." More than once, someone has found a dead animal of some sort floating in a vat of one brew or another, though whether the corpse was put there by Josh or someone unhappy with him is still open to debate.

Regardless, Estes is nearly psychotic when it comes to defending his precious brews, and will scream at anyone from the lowliest tourist to the mightiest executive from Corporate who dares make a suggestion to him regarding improving any of his concoctions. On the rare occasions when Michaud and Estes go at it, the rest of the company leaves the building.

As for what precisely Estes is, the only surety is that it's not something human. One former employee swears she saw him tasting a new batch by dipping his tongue into it — from four feet away. He's heavyset, but not fat, and occasionally it looks like his arms bend in places where he really shouldn't have joints. But he did win *Hops* magazine's coveted "Brewmaster of the Year" award for 1999, so who's going to argue with him for being a little eccentric, even as regards his anatomy?

So What To Do?

With all of this information about King and its various subcompanies in hand, the question arises: What can I do with it? What sort of stories can I draw from this? After all, one can only run the old Bane-in-a-beer-bottle shtick so many times without devolving into Strange Brew-esque slapstick. It would seem difficult at first. After all, you can't fight a bottle, and "raiding the brewery" offers limited development possibilities. But King is a devious and many-faceted corporation, and that

means that there are plenty of devious and multi-faceted plots waiting out there to be plucked.

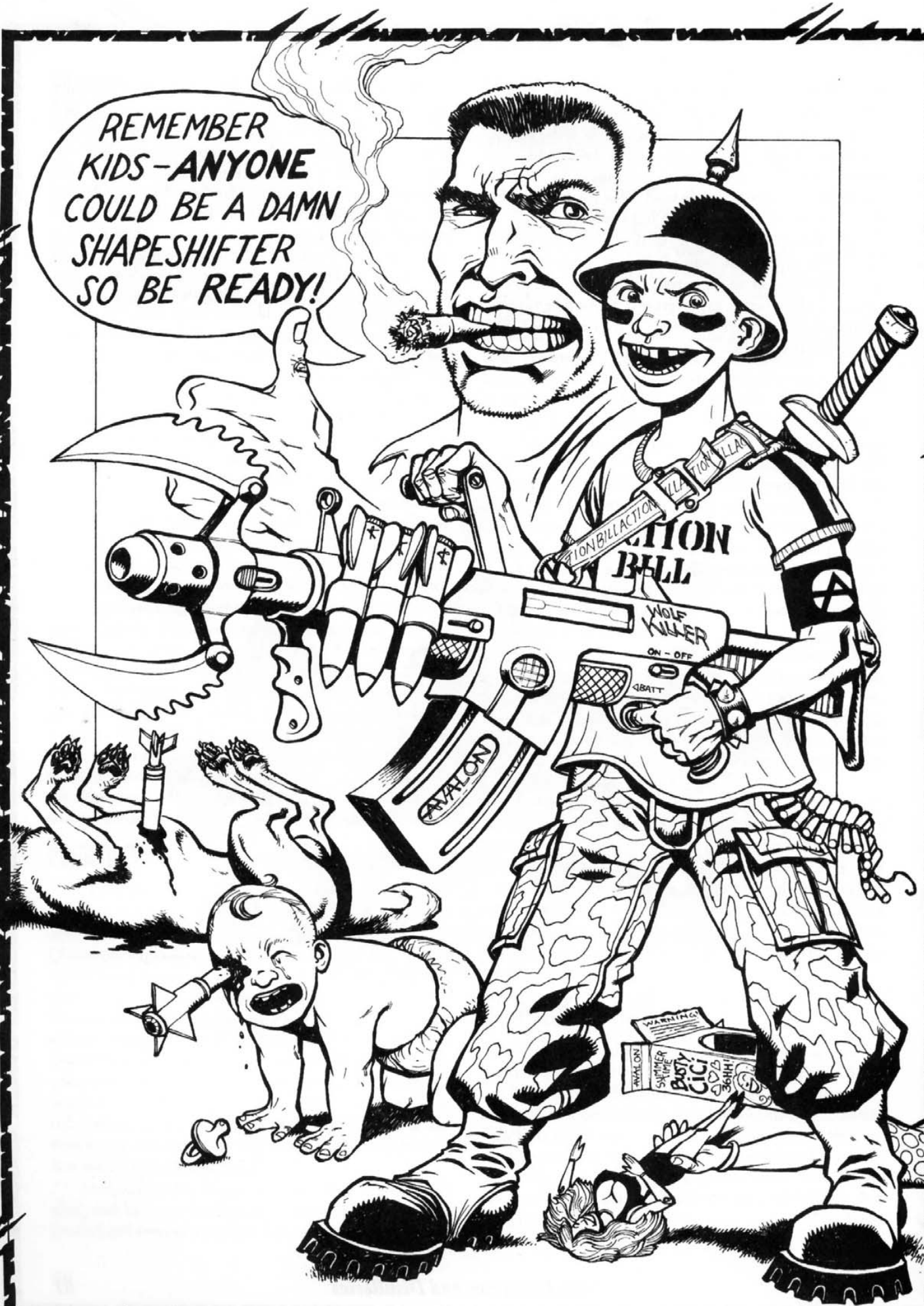
King's political influence is one option. If the characters run into some particularly nasty dumping, they may want to trace the toxins to their source, only to discover that the dumping is now perfectly legal. That sends them after the legislators, who have hidden links to King.

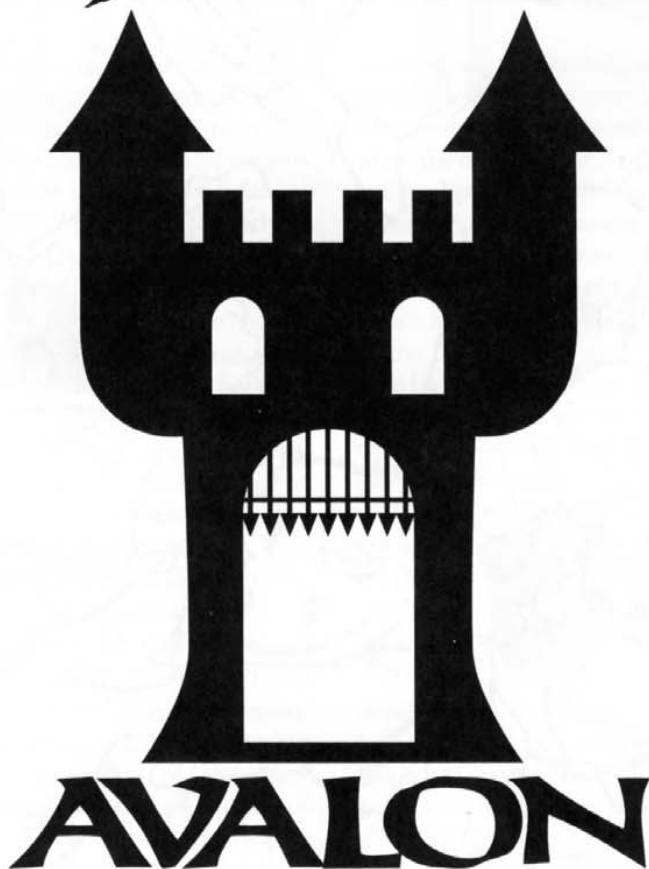
Another possibility is to work through AquaClear 2001. The characters may see the team members as potential allies, or as dangerous frauds who need to be squashed. Uncovering the layers of deception behind the façade is the inevitable next step, as the depths of King's corruption is revealed.

The smaller King-affiliated operations also offer plenty of possibilities. A tour of the Ten Tickle brewery — as a cover for trying to steal old Wizard Willem's recipes. Watching an explosion of carnivorous vines in California and trying to trace them back to their source. Seeing a homeless man get possessed under the influence of Pyrrhus and suddenly being knee-deep in Banes. Tracking a shipment of something nasty that's coming in with a load of imported beer. All serve as excellent jumping off points for extended chronicle ideas, and all avoid the obvious. King purveys a sneaky sort of evil, and there's no reason at all you can't do the same.



REMEMBER
KIDS-ANYONE
COULD BE A DAMN
SHAPESHIFTER
SO BE READY!





*Who buys a minute's mirth to wail a week?
Or sells eternity to get a toy?
For one sweet grape who will the vine destroy?
— Shakespeare, The Rape of Lucrece*

Feeding Frenzy at Local Mall?

(Reuters) Store owners and parents were stunned when over three hundred youngsters ranging in age from four to 17 stormed the Palm Coast Mall's Zray Toy Store in search of the latest Pocket Beast release, a stuffed turtle-monster nicknamed "Green Leo." Ten children were taken to a local hospital and treated for minor injuries while several others were checked at the scene by paramedics and released. Jon Vincent, regional manager of Zray's, commented: "We thought we were prepared for the customer demand, but these kids

really surprised us. For future releases, we've hired extra security and may instigate some kind of lottery system." Pocket Beasts, a product line of Avalon Incorporated, have become much sought-after collector's items. Recent releases of "Missing Lynx" and "Crocobilly" have incited similar incidents at other malls, including one occurrence where a young girl was nearly trampled to death by children and adults scrambling to collect one of the stuffed animals. A representative from Avalon Incorporated was unavailable for comment.

Welcome to the cute, fuzzy, multimillion dollar world of the toy industry. Here, it's injection-molded plastic in all the latest colors, big-eyed critters who may be toting mini-ray guns or anything else to steal a buck from the purses of parents desperate to make sure their kids have the latest, greatest hypermarketed craze. Avalon Incorporated have their marketing teams working almost nonstop to make sure their stocks continue to soar through selling what the public demands for its youngsters. But the company goes way beyond toy trains, cute dollies and tricycles. Avalon didn't necessarily begin the darker trend in children's toys, the in-vogue notion of grosser and costlier, but they've sure taken advantage of it. Avalon gives the kids exactly what they want: violent, noisy and over the top.

Not Mere Toymakers

Storytellers, you may well be wondering how in the hell you'll use a toy company as the latest enemy in your Werewolf campaign. Well, we'll give it to you straight. If you have the secretaries and line production teams of Avalon slug it out with a bunch of Wendigo, the humans are going to lose their heads. Even most of the trained security guards won't be a match for a gang of pissy werewolves. The key to using Avalon successfully in a chronicle is to remember how



subtle they are. Subtle. Now say it again. That's right, Avalon likes to be underhanded about how it corrupts the young. Sure, they have some disgusting Wyrms-tainted fetish toys, but most of their products are more refined in their evil. You'll get ideas about that as you keep reading, but to whet your appetites, think about some of these things:

- Avalon Incorporated, following a suggestion from some higher-ups in Pentex, makes an enormous donation of toys to several orphanages. There's no Bane stench, but a lot of the kids may begin thinking that ultraviolence is a cool way to solve problems after playing with a pile of Action Bill® figures, complete with miniaturized large bore automatic weapons. Blowing up things is fun! Maybe they'll try it out on the next well-meaning adult who tries to send them to bed before midnight, perhaps with a cool zipgun they learned about from the nifty mini-comic that comes with each figure.

- In the same benevolent shipment, Avalon includes a number of Cici® dolls along with bubble packs of fancy clothes and accessories. The doll's designer blue jeans wouldn't fit anything wider than a soda straw, and when Cici® "puts on" these skintight garments, her voice chip complains about eating too much and getting fat as a cow. The message is simple: anyone who can't fit into size 2 jeans is a real pig and really worthless. The girls remember this the next time they dare to indulge in an ice cream sundae, and the matron is puzzled why they all spend much of the night in the bathroom.

Imagine the influence this kind of propaganda and crushing of esteem can have on any children. That's exactly

what Avalon wants, to make sure kids grow up mean and hurting. They're not out to rule the world, just make it nastier and less caring than it already is. Let the parents think that Avalon's toys are the best way to keep the kids quiet; it doesn't really matter *what* they're playing with as long as they stay out of mom and dad's hair. Normalizing violence and self-loathing, that's the Avalon way. This is how they best serve the Wyrms' desire for corruption and destruction.

One last thing, which in light of current events is unfortunately necessary to say. While toys and games can certainly make an impact on children and their attitudes towards cruelty and violence, they're not the *only* factor in turning kids into killers. A number of elements, including parental involvement, life experiences and even brain chemistry, are involved. It's too simple to say that a toy or a game *independently* causes a child to go over the edge and become a murderer. Avalon is meant to be a *fictional* corporation who knowingly and openly plan the worst possible toys to injure kids' self-esteem and moral development. Think of them *not* as a spoof of toy companies in the real world, but of the darkest reflection of those companies caught in the Wyrms' coils. *Quod erat demonstratum.*

A History of Avalon

Marian Booker, Avalon's Head of Project Development and Design, fidgeted nervously with the frog closures on her new suit as she sat in the small conference room with Avalon's

distinguished guest. After accepting a cup of coffee and starting to read the latest draft of the mission statement, Kathryn Mollett said little. Damn Gerald Brinegan and his machismo games anyway, Marian fumed. Her counterpart in Operations had some stupid, antiquated notion that "the two businesswomen" would automatically bond. Marian thought Kathryn Mollett was more than a match for Gerald. Or herself for that matter. Their distinguished guest hadn't risen to the position of top human resources manager in Pentex without reason.

Mollett looked up after a few moments, a slight smile on her cosmetic-moistened lips. "Very interesting, Ms. Booker. I like the motivational strategies you've used. It's important for employees to *perceive* that they are active parts of the team, rather than disposable cogs. You've got everything here to make them believe that, with the notes on process and teambuilding. It should keep them begging for more work." Her smile broadened, like a tiger meeting a wounded antelope in the open field, thought Marian. "I'm so anxious to see more."

"I'll start the our audiovisual from Mr. Dial, then," said Marian, moving over to her laptop and activating the DVD and state-of-the-art Tellus portable projector. A few select members of the media staff had been working around the clock to put together the real history of the corporation, not the sugary sweet version Marian and Gerald sent on the road to recruit new staff and distributors. Daniel had warned that Kathryn wanted to know the truth in as much detail as possible, so Marian had made a lot of last minute additions herself.

As a splash of color and the Avalon logo lit the screen, Daniel Dial's silky voice began the dialogue. The logo folded up into an image of Avalon's founder. Marian watched as Mollett carefully took in his distinguished good looks and the intelligent gleam in his blue eyes. Much improved from the old mugshot style photo in her own files. He didn't look 45, either, come to think of it.

"Avalon Incorporated, Fun for Today and Tomorrow. That's our motto and my own personal mantra. Hello, I'm Daniel Dial, CEO and founder of Avalon. Ms. Mollett and other distinguished members of Pentex and its subsidiaries, welcome to Memphis. We trust this presentation will give you a complete picture of Avalon's history, showing how our goals, interests and endeavors have merged together to create a company that sets and accomplishes the key points of our mission statement." Kathryn Mollett raised an eyebrow at this rather empty and redundant declaration. Marian groaned inwardly, wondering if he'd nabbed it from the "Make a Mission Plan" website she often visited, but Mollett continued to listen intently to Dial's narrative without comment.

"As you know, I began Avalon in 1968. I had been a senior intern at Pentex, working in the Project Coordination Division. It was a time for youth, a zenith for the young which will, perhaps, never be the same again. Youth had power and energy; some of them even had purpose. But for all that, they were a malleable, untapped population. I asked myself, if there was some way to influence these young people, what could be accomplished? Were the young really so hard to influence or

turn to more, to our minds, useful exploitation? At what age would these youth be most accessible? How could we reach them and make them more useful to the company? That's when the basic idea for Avalon was born. If I could produce and market toys that didn't necessarily create a medium for violence but rather *encouraged* the natural tendencies of self-interest, a desire for pleasure and eagerness for sensation that all children have, I could truly have some influence on the future. But let's face reality. No mainstream distributors, no matter how greedy, would be willing to sell materials that were blatantly horrid and disgusting or, to steal a word from one of Kubrick's masterpieces, ultraviolent. Perhaps this has changed since 1968, and I did want to point out how wonderful our Pentex associate Herrick's Retailers has been to work with. Still, we have to walk a fine line between toys that intrigue children with their sheer nastiness and those that will get past any consumer watchdogs."

The screen faded to a bulleted diagram, Dial's voice continuing the narrative.

"In the 1930s, Piaget wrote about children's cognitive development, and in the 1960s, Kohlberg added to that body of knowledge with writing on children's moral development. Granted, through the years, they've both come under a lot of criticism, and there is certainly fluidity in all the stages, but I think they provide an excellent basis for our own theories of child development in creating toys. I know, Ms. Mollett, you're a trained psychologist, but for the laypersons in the audience, let me recap."

Piaget's Developmental Stages:

- **Sensory/Motor (Birth to Age 2).** Characterized by a need for sensations and exploration.
- **Preoperational (Ages 2 - 7).** The child engages in **imitation**, seeks **sensory input** and generally views the world **only in terms of himself**; he cannot imagine, for example, that a pond exists for any other purposes than for his own desire to play in it
- **Concrete Operational (Ages 7 - 11).** The child finds her own identity, understands limited abstraction and can grasp cause and effect.
- **Formal Operational (Ages 12 and onward).** The older child and adolescent is capable of more sophisticated abstract reasoning.

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development:

- **Preconventional (Birth to Age 10).** A child determines what is right either by predetermined rules, set by an adult or listed in a game, for example, or by **what feels good**.
- **Conventional (Ages 10 - 16).** Children have usually learned that it's simply wrong to hurt others, and that certain laws and orders are necessary to promote justice.
- **Postconventional (Ages 16 and onward).** The young adult may or may not ever reach this stage, in which he comes to understand that laws and values are relative.

"Now, of course you must understand that I've summarized many volumes of text in just these few sentences, but

it's enough for our purposes. Look carefully at the Preoperational and Preconventional stages I've highlighted, for these are the ages and attitudes the majority of our products target. We want to give children toys that stimulate their senses and make them feel good while simultaneously undermining their grasp of right and wrong. We desire to provide them games and activities that encourage them to engage frequently in reflexive imitation and self-absorption. In this way, our consumers, the kids who play with our products, fail to progress on to the latter stages in both schemes of development even though they age chronologically. It's my understanding that Pentex would be delighted to see adults who have little independent thinking, much self-absorption and a great deal of apathy. I have spent much time in development during recent months on the latter of these goals. In fact, this is the new direction I would like to use for Avalon in the 21st century."

The diagram faded into a movie montage of factories and toys, all bearing the Avalon logo.

"To continue my own story, let's go back to 1968 when I was an intern at Pentex. Though I'm certain things have improved under your wise tenure, Ms. Mollett, even a senior intern in those days had few privileges. I was in large part a gopher, and as a college graduate with a management and sociology background, I found the prospect of counting staples and running mimeographs rather depressing. I parlayed a meager inheritance from an elderly aunt into producing what was to become Avalon's first major product, the original Gooshy Gooze. It was an overnight sensation. Packaged into canisters just right for small hands and priced at only a quarter per can, kids everywhere snapped them up. I'd been producing these items, with help from some friends, out of my studio apartment. Quite a feat, stacking those canisters in my living room! I marketed it myself to a couple of local toy retailers, an original order of 10,000 canisters split between the two stores. I made \$2500 less the cost of some pizzas and beer for my helpers, and since the inheritance had paid for the canisters, ingredients and marketing ads, I came out way in the clear. \$2500 in 1968 was enough to buy quite a bit, considering an extremely nice house cost less than \$20,000. But I wasted none of it on material goods. I turned the profit back into my tiny company, got some pro bono legal advice on incorporating from a friend and founded Avalon all on my own. Action Bill® followed on the heels of my first success and guaranteed Avalon's place in the toy industry." Dial's smiling image reappeared on the screen, coming together from the montage of Gooshy Gooze and other toys.

"So the rest I'm sure you know. Pentex, impressed by my ideas and acumen, wanted to buy out my company. At first I was understandably reluctant, since Pentex had taken me so much for granted. But I did like Adrian Newberry's ideas for expanding and, ah, enhancing my product lines. Our brainstorming led to successes such as Mister Mystic and the Doctor Chuckles Surgery Kit. And Action Bill and Gooshy Gooze have undergone some marvelous updates since Avalon

Mission Statement

Avalon Incorporated pledges to provide toys, games and tools to enhance the child's imagination and development. Our belief is that childhood should be a time for exploration and discovery. To this end, we strive to give kids toys that will challenge and fascinate their minds as well as their hands. Avalon: Fun for Today and Tomorrow.

For our valued employees, we provide the following:

- **Direction:** We clarify for all team members our Key Result Areas and Measurable Goals

- **Process Knowledge:** We give you the opportunity for Training, Self-Management and System Comprehension

- **Resources:** You need the right tools for the job. We offer the latest Tellus Computers, profit sharing and modern work facilities for all employees

- **Support:** Avalon is here for you with Mentoring, Power Sharing, Interdependence and the Work Rewards™ System

We look forward to having you on the Avalon Incorporated Team!

became a subsidiary of Pentex. With new products like Pocket Beasts and Bottom Line, we look forward to continuing our growth trend well into the 21st century."

The display faded into the Avalon logo and then to black.

Mission: Mayhem

"Of course the mission statement and history presentation doesn't really explain what we have planned under the

MEMO

To: Kathryn Mollett, Subdivision Director, Human Resources Development

From: Daniel Dial, CEO, Avalon Industries

Re: Marketing Strategy with OmniTV and Tellus Industries

It was so good to see you at the recent Pentex board meeting, Kathryn. I'm excited about the prospect of increasing our line of Mega Power Teen League Action Figures® via the marketing agreement with OmniTV. I'm delighted you liked the prototypes and agree that we could shorten Mandy Maniaca's tutu just a bit and lengthen Brad Berzerko's sword a few centimeters. After all, we really want these figures to sell, don't we?

I'm especially passionate about the Cici® Designer Gown CD-ROM. As we discussed, computer games marketed just for girls are a hot item right now, and linking computers with the latest fashions seems to be a giant leap in the right direction.

I look forward to your visit to Memphis in April.

table, as it were," explained Marian as soon as the DVD ended. *Mollett doesn't look happy*, she thought. *Why did Daniel have to bring up all that stuff about apathy? He talks like it's the only part of the plan. I think our guest wants to know why our products aren't encouraging a little more activity. And that shit about Pentex spurning him? I should never have let him talk me into it!* Unaware that her voice had taken on a shrill edge, she continued. "While invoking a mood of passive acceptance in our consumers, we also want to encourage a dynamic perspective."

"Do tell me more," said Kathryn Mollett dryly. "And don't waste my time with any hedging. I want a straight summary of how Avalon's goals merge with those of Pentex."

Marian pulled out a disk and inserted it into the laptop. She typed in a password, and a new screen appeared on the overhead. Mollett glanced at it and gave a nod of approval and interest.

"Ms. Mollett, I think you'd agree that Avalon's goals are somewhat long term," said Marian. "We may not see results in six weeks, but rather over six months or even six years. As Mr. Dial discussed, we have a graduated plan that targets each of the successive stages of children's physical, moral and intellectual development." She pointed to the screen. "Here are the performance objectives handed down by Pentex and how our intrusions into children's development converge with those goals."

"So you can see that at least two-thirds of our action plans deal with influencing young children to undertake desirable actions, such as the desensitization toward guns, especially in the preoperational ages of two to seven, when children seek imitation and sensory input. We've also tried to target tactile senses and adjust children's thinking to believe that more is better, to promote our sales and to plant the seeds for when these kids are young adults."

Mollett finished her coffee and looked closely at Marian. "Ms. Booker, I think what we need to do is clarify what I

mean by the word active. I don't suggest for an instant that what you, Mr. Brinegan and Mr. Dial are doing for Avalon is wrong. I agree completely that steering the young down a path of submissive, rote activity is quite important. The suggestions Avalon's toys plant subtly into the mind of our youth are impressive. And you've done a tremendous job of staying on top of trends in the industry. I'm just a little concerned that Avalon is missing out on the other important things, some of the less passive responses your company's toys used to push to extremes."

Marian nodded, apparently seeking more information, but really trying to gain a moment to rally her defenses. "Can you be specific? We'll try to do whatever is necessary, Ms. Mollett."

"Very well, here's an example. Thanks to some of the additions and adjustments by Mr. Newberry, older toys like Doctor Chuckles Surgery Kit and the New Improved Glow-in-the-Dark Gooshy Gooze, ah, enticed children to engage in erratic behavior. They were *actively* carrying out some of the agendas Pentex has in mind. But now, Avalon seems bent on merely *influencing* children, rather than pushing them towards specific behaviors." Mollett gave her a genuinely encouraging smile. "Let me repeat myself. It's not that the apathy, rote-thinking angle is unimportant. It's just that of late, Avalon seems to be more often overlooking the importance of self-loathing and violence where once the company espoused it totally. Pocket Beasts, which I understand was your endeavor, has been a pleasant exception. Loved that clipping you sent on the mall frenzy! But understandably, as a representative of Avalon's parent company, I'm concerned about the seeming paradigm shift in design and development I see here." She paused for a breath. "Take this voice chip technology that Mr. Dial is pushing for in the next release of all the action figures. It's quite intriguing, the idea of children merely sitting and listening as their toys all talk to one another, leaving them passive observers. It's quite interesting,

Pentex/Avalon Strategic Goals

Pentex Objective	Avalon Objective	Action Plan Example
Desensitization	Apathy, Sensory Overload	Toys that operate independently of child's input. Items that promote repetition and encourage rote imitation. Suggestive use of color and texture that attract children to all products. Use of dangerous weapons as normative in all action figures and games as appropriate.
Materialism	Acquisition	Low-priced toys. Games that promote the idea that wealth and greed are positive and desirable. Dolls that suggest societal conceptions of body image are correct, leading to desire for consumption of material goods instead of individual self-worth.
Urbanization	Sprawl as Megatrend	Cityscape expansions for all action figures (i.e., townhouse for Cici, Action Bill headquarters located in city). Games that promote large cities as cutting edge and rural areas as deadlands. Premium posters of ultramodern cityscapes included with select products.

almost like a three-dimensional TV show in their own bedroom. But how is that different than actually watching something on OmniTV? Do you see my point? Diversification is essential, and I'm concerned that Avalon is overreaching into territory that Omni and even Tellus are handling satisfactorily. It's simply not cost effective."

Both women started as the conference room door opened and Daniel Dial walked in. Marian breathed a slight sigh of relief; she'd felt as if Mollett was dragging her into deep waters with no chance to grab a life jacket. Marian knew Daniel had been watching from a closed-circuit TV monitor, and with one glance at their guest's face, she saw that Mollett had known, too.

Daniel's smile was open and genuine as he clasped Mollett's hand firmly. "Kathryn, a million apologies for my lateness to this briefing. I was finishing up a sales report for Franklin Rubin, and I wanted to have the results ready to share with you too. I'm delighted to say, as predicted, fourth quarter earnings were at a record high."

Mollett gave an approving tilt of her head. "That's excellent, Daniel. We were just talking about the shift in some of Avalon's products and goals."

"Yes, I heard a bit of that," he replied, taking a seat beside her. "And I've been thinking about the best ways to convince you that I'm onto a strong trend." He drummed his fingers on the table. "All right, let's think about the future for a minute. I know Pentex is quite focused on the 21st century, and I need you to see that's what I'm targeting as well. I'm trying to broaden Avalon's efforts beyond churning out child killers and instead mold them into useful, eager citizens ready to consume whatever Pentex feeds them. Perhaps not at present, but five, ten, even twenty years in the future." Daniel's eyes held her in thrall. "Tell me, Kathryn, what would you rather have, a 10-year old who pulls the wings off butterflies and steals comic books from his buddies after raping the poodle, or millions of slack-jawed adults who gobble down O'Tolley's fast food as they mindlessly work in a Magadon assembly line? Wouldn't you say that's worth a little overlap in the present, with the voice-chip technology for example? Because those kids I'm trying to merely influence, as you've put it, are those glassy-eyed thirtysomethings of the next millennium."

And for the moment, she had no answer for him.

People

After a lunch break, they'd moved onto new territory, shelving the issue of company goals and methods for the moment. Kathryn Mollett promised to review some of the new materials Daniel had given her, share the ideas with Newberry and get back to them in a few weeks. Gerald Brinegan had joined the group once their discussion turned to employees and production issues.

Gerald cleared his throat and pointed to a new overhead display. "As you know, we have four product divisions: public relations and marketing, consumer reaction manage-

Theme and Mood

The theme of Avalon is clearly corruption of the innocent. Avalon differs from most other Pentex subsidiaries in that it doesn't spend much time destroying the environment or *directly* corrupting adults who might be on a path of greed anyway (the adult collector lines being a relatively new concept to them). Instead, Avalon takes the delicate framework of a child's moral and intellectual development and twists it, subtly and cruelly. Children are not adults; they are still learning to tell right from wrong. By nature, they're self-centered. Of course, most kids grow out of this as they move closer to adulthood, but Avalon seeks to keep these childish behaviors intact in the adults. So the company *does* influence grown-ups, albeit on a longitudinal time scale; they lay out a framework in childhood and try to see that things are set up for extreme nastiness from other subsidiaries when the kiddies reach their 20s and beyond.

The current mood of Avalon is enthusiasm and eagerness mingled with uncertainty. From its inception, the toy company has been an active and enthusiastic partner in Pentex's schemes. Dial, Brinegan and Booker are big advocates for their business and loyal as well. But Dial's new visions are puzzling to everyone but himself. Brinegan and Booker are just as bewildered as Mollett about why the paradigm shifts in Avalon's goals and Daniel's designs are taking place. They hope he either finds a way to make Pentex happy with his new ideas or goes back to doing exactly what they want. Neither wishes to leave the company if they can help it.

Storytellers may want to come up with some "what if" scenarios about Avalon's future and extrapolate to whatever best suits the needs of their chronicle.

ment, engineering and production, and testing and application. Our first two divisions have their main staff in our home office here in Memphis. The engineering and production unit and the testing and application units are actually merged together in each of four large centers located in Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas and our newest center in Las Vegas. One of the reasons why we're located in these cities is that we draw many of our interns from family and consumer science programs, what used to be called home ec. Many colleges housing these programs are within an hour's drive of these Avalon centers. A lot of majors in this field want to go to work in the toy industry, and this gives us an opportunity to sift among the many applicants and find those who appreciate our mission statement." He gave a slight grin, which Mollett acknowledged with a smile.

"In light of some of the materials you've sent to us," continued Gerald, "we're working hard on employee morale. Incentives and profit sharing have increased 15%. We also gave raises last year on an average of 10% last year."

"Which was only a tiny portion of our profits," interjected Marian quickly. "As you know, we had fourth quarter record earnings. So the raises were a minor part of that. It's important, as you've noted, to keep the best people we have happy and productive. Very productive."

"For most of the staff, particularly the designers and engineers," said Gerald, "the work is a pleasure. We really have to do very little to keep them involved. Some don't indulge in their darker ideas about toys, but for every one of those, we have many others who are quite the pranksters." He chuckled and mused about the new adult collectors' items coming out in the fall; the blueprints had crossed his desk just yesterday, and Gerald had to put in yet another late night studying his products.

Employees

Gerald continued his lecture as he handed Mollett an amber folder stamped with the Avalon logo. "Those are summaries of all the data I'm about to go over, Ms. Mollett, so you can look at them in your leisure. Okay, back to our organizational strategy. The Memphis office is strictly managerial, but each of our four production centers has about 500 employees. About 450 of these are actually on the assembly line; the remaining 50 are divided among the engineers and product testers. We also have about four or five public relations, marketing and consumer reaction management employees at each of the four centers, just in case there are minor daily decisions to be made on those kinds of matters. Can't have them calling Memphis every time they need to ask a question about a color for Cici's newest dress."

"And that does fit in nicely with the mission statement's note about autonomy," agreed Mollett. "But aren't you concerned that Avalon is still relatively small, especially when compared with larger production units?"

"For now, our size is efficient, not too big, not too small. We certainly hope to grow in the near future, but at the present, we have a feasible balance," concluded Gerald.

Public Relations and Marketing (PRM)

"As you might expect, public relations and marketing, which also includes a traditional sales component, receives a substantial portion of funding allocation. Advertising and keeping our consumers and distributors alert to new products is crucial. We use the latest computer technology, as you've seen from some of today's audiovisuals, to make our presentations memorable and attractive. Moreover, we're constantly making donations to children's homes and sending out temporary workers to Herrick's and other department and toy stores with free prize giveaways and complimentary samples of mini-action figures and even a few Pocket Beasts overstocks. For example, we had a great success when a couple of college interns did a demo at a local Zray's Toy Store. They dressed up like Action Bill and one of his W.O.L.F. enemies and had a knock-down, drag-out slugfest in front of a large audience. The crowd loved it! And sales zoomed at that location for weeks afterward. So it may

be that OmniTV and our own design staff might like to inject some real bloodshed into the Action Bill line."

"It depends on the watchdog level," sighed Daniel. "We actually had some mini bloodpacks, fake of course, in a special edition Action Bill in the late 1970s. They sold quickly, but thanks to some damn parent-action group, several distributors balked. It's a real collector's item now."

"Maybe we can give a hand in that area," promised Mollett.

"Anyway," said Gerald, "our advertising is crucial to our business. We do most of the work in-house, simply because of the special nature of our products. And we do so much marketing and advertising, it's more cost effective. Always a good thing."

Consumer Reaction Management (CRM)

"This is the newest and smallest division of the company. Their job is closely related to marketing, but is more pure research than developing plans for sales utilization. It's a good place for interns, too. Most of what CRM does are phone surveys, asking parents about usage of Avalon products. Sure, we get some complaints, but most of the questions are geared towards straight quantitative info, like how many hours a day does your child play with Toy X, or which Avalon toys does your child prefer, and so on. Basic information for us to use, in fact, *against* the consumer watchdogs who assert that our toys don't promote diversity and things like that. How can someone complain about Cici and body image, for example, when we have hundreds of girls on tape saying freely how much they love their new dolls? What loving mommy is going to rip Cici away from a happy — and therefore, less demanding — kid?" They all chuckled.

"Another job of CRM is, as you may have surmised, watching the watchdogs and performing spin doctoring operations as required. We borrowed a strategy from Magadon that's proven most effective. Several CRM employees are hired, full time, to be mock consumers. These people travel all over North America, shopping for toys. They find out which of distributors and retailers are knowledgeable about our products and which ones are falling down on the job. They discover a lot more than we would by sending in official corporate types. Plus, we get first hand information on what's selling and what prices are like. Sure, we have loads of hard sales data, but this little bit of firsthand, qualitative research is extremely helpful."

Engineering and Production (EP)

"While few if any of our toy designers, engineers and production line employees know of Avalon's corporate ties to Pentex, they're nonetheless doing a great job of fulfilling our unstated overall goals. Like we've all said, it takes no real effort to get this part of the team excited about their jobs. Most of them eagerly put in more than 40 hours a week."

"Do you ever have employees who, like those in defense contract factories such as Nastrum Enterprises, balk at producing, er, questionable items?" inquired Mollett.

"Of course we always have a few nosy, disagreeable sorts," acknowledged Gerald. "But we find that they generally leave the company rather quickly. The others, well, they find it's a good place to work. The designers especially are a contented lot; many came here because we were so much more open to their ideas than any of the other big toy companies. Our attrition rate is quite low, and if anyone who's been on the payroll for a while does have qualms, no one is saying much about it."

"In fact," added Marian, "our new screening process has cut down considerably on the amount of employee turnover. A basic psych exam usually tips us off on who will be a viable member of the team and who won't." Mollett gave an approving nod.

"To look at numbers for a minute, out of about 2000 total employees at the four regional centers, 1800 are line production workers. They operate injection molding machines for our plastics, package our action figures and prepare materials for shipping. Of the remaining 200, about 40 are designers. They're the 'idea people' who conceptually plan our toys. They work closely with the 80 or so engineers, who figure out how to get the ideas into production. Let me add here that we've really brought in a lot of engineers who have experience in animatronics, CAD-CAM and computer animation. It really has speeded up production. And last but certainly not least, we have around 80 product testers, who take our toys out on the road to see what the kids think. A surprising number of local daycares near the regional centers have been extremely cooperative with us in that regard."

Daniel raised a hand. "I wanted to add one quick note to Gerald's presentation, Kathryn. Until about a year ago, just before the Las Vegas plant opened, each production center output only two or three products each. For example, the Atlanta plant only manufactured the Cici and Action Bill lines, while Chicago only made board games and so on. But analysis of our technical efficiency showed us that this really slowed down our delivery time to retailers. If the Chicago area experienced a long-term brownout, that totally threw off our output of Nuke 'Em, you see. So we made the center in Las Vegas diversified; it produces *all* the toys and games we currently market."

"And how's that working out?" asked Mollett, genuinely curious.

"Surprisingly well. Granted, the upfront cost of construction was substantially more than that of the other centers, but the increased productivity was enough to justify making this kind of switch at all our factories eventually."

"Keep me informed, then," replied Mollett. "As long as you can justify that such a move will soon insure profit, I'm willing to give it a chance." She looked at her watch. Gerald, Marian and Daniel snuck a quick glance at each other.

Testing and Application (TA)

"I see we're getting close to the time when you need to leave for the airport, so I'll keep my comments on testing and application brief," said Gerald, clearing his throat. "As I was

saying, we've had a lot of cooperation from daycare centers in areas near our production facilities with field testing our products. Most of the testing staff have some background working with children, and the kiddies need little prodding to try out the coolest new toys around. In fact, we think this may be why sales tend to be highest in regions where our centers are located. Distribution is good and the free product samples encourage more consumption."

"Not to mention that the daycares where we conduct testing are often in extremely low-income neighborhoods," said Daniel with a wink. "So the kids who are clamoring loudest for the toys, which we often provide for free, and enjoying the shoot 'em up themes are the ones who may be predisposed to do the worst damage."

"Other products we test right in our centers. Even the adults love our games, especially Nuke 'Em. Demographics indicate most of the production line employees are not quite bright enough to grasp Bottom Line, but it's a favorite among the engineers and product developers." He skipped ahead a few slides on the laptop, ending the presentation with the Avalon logo glowing on the viewscreen.

Mollett didn't say anything for a few moments, looking through her notes for any last minute questions. Methodically, she closed her organizer and rearranged all the materials she'd been given in her briefcase. Finally, after giving them a cool once-over, she spoke.

"Well, thank you all for an interesting presentation. Naturally, I want to review what we've discussed here today in greater detail before passing on recommendations for improving Avalon's production and mission as a Pentex subsidiary. I don't mind telling you that I think many things seem to be progressing well. But I also want you to know that I am...concerned about a few key areas. But enough for now. I assume there's someone to drive me to the airport?"

"It will be my distinct pleasure, Kathryn," said Daniel, escorting their guest out of the room.

Marian and Gerald stared at each other for a few moments. Then she asked, "That comp case of King whiskey still in your office, Gerald?"

"Yeah," he answered, the exhaustion heavy in his voice.

"Bring it to mine. I think I could drink a whole bottle on my own, but go ahead and grab two glasses."

Minds Behind the Masks

Kathryn Mollett settled into her plush first-class seat, accepted a glass of chardonnay and booted her laptop to do a little reading review, relieved to be headed home from her Memphis visit. Things at Avalon had gone more or less as expected. Some stuff was interesting, like the product summaries, but most of it was rather boring, the same shit she heard from most of the subsidiaries. As she called up the Avalon dossiers, Kathryn grimaced thinking about how much it had cost a hacker to break into Chase Lamont's private notes on the top guns at Avalon, but damned if she'd ask that asshole to share his material on Dial, Booker and

Brinegan. Sure, she had access to their nicely detailed HRD files, but she'd known there was more on that triumvirate than met the eye and that Lamont would have it.

At first glance, she saw that the notes on Dial, Brinegan and Booker were apparently transcribed from the mini-recorder her rival constantly carried around. Despite the fact that she wanted Lamont to rot in every hell imaginable, Kathryn had to admit the man's perspective made interesting reading, even if it was a bit stream-of-consciousness. As the plane reached cruising altitude, she settled easily into the material.

Daniel Dial

What to say about Daniel Joseph Dial? He's a poised businessman, 45 years old, who never fails to impress people on first meetings. And for that precise reason, my hackles went up when I was introduced to him at last year's holiday affair. Everything in this guy's life just seemed to fall so perfectly into place. The mysterious inheritance he used to start Avalon, knowing just the right place and time to introduce his signature product, that disgusting Gooshy Gooze, even finding a way to get Adrian Newberry to promote the toys in their early years...it seems awfully damned convenient. What's Dial got on his side? Who is he working for? None of my private contacts have a clue. And why the hell can't they find out anything? There's not a sign of contact by any unknown benefactors or outside agents. I must admit, Dial has me stumped.

I did locate a few strands of blackmail material, though. Dial is fond of explaining that his background is in business and sociology. Well, for some reason, no college in this country, or any nation in the world for that matter, has a record on the guy, at least not in sociology or business. A David Dial did take courses at MIT in the mid-60s in physics, but the school's records are incomplete around that time due to a fire which destroyed the microfiche. A fire just after the aforementioned David Dial was a student, I might add. I did find an extremely obscure reference to an article on building lifelike mannequins by a D. Dial. But nothing else. The journal in the reference note, *Paradigma*, is apparently out of print. No one here at Pentex or among my other associates has ever heard of it. I suspect that it must have been a fictional periodical, made up by Dial himself, in an effort to gain some status in his field.

One last thing about Dial that I've noticed, and it could be beneficial or it could be trouble. He tends to get along with his two closest underlings, Gerald Brinegan and Marian Booker, quite well. They're almost like the three Gorgons, happily turning the hearts of kids to stone. Nothing wrong with that at all, but when subsidiary heads get too chummy, it might mean trouble for Pentex. Best to keep an eye on it.

Gerald Brinegan

Brinegan is organized, but he's ot-nay-oo-tay-right-bay, I must say. He barely squeaked through a state college with a C+ average. For whatever reason, Dial recruited him right out of school around 1975, just about the time Avalon's sales were really starting to take off. Brinegan is a few years younger than Dial, about 39, and nowhere near as dapper or as comfortable around technology as his boss. He's almost a Luddite com-

pared to Dial, in fact. But Brinegan has a definite talent: he can see the big picture and persevere towards it. The man is completely bullheaded when he wants to be, and I guess that's what makes him attractive to Dial. Brinegan is an asset in that he seems to follow orders completely and thoroughly. He lets nothing stand in the way of Dial's orders. Nothing. I'd estimate that his unshaking loyalty will keep him at Avalon for a number of years to come.

As far as blackmail material, there's an assault conviction from his college days, suspended sentence. Looks like a frat boy raid on a sorority house from the spotty police report. Nothing significant in any case. To get at Brinegan, I suspect we'd have to directly threaten his interests at Avalon. I've no doubt that would make him jump to attention.

Marian Booker

If Brinegan is a little slow, Marian Booker more than makes up for him. From what I observed, she gets along fine

QWIK MEMO: Worker Profiles

Marian,

As requested, here are some basic profiles of our staff from engineering and design, production and marketing. Hope this helps with the executive report you're working on.

Gerald

Engineer

The typical Avalon product engineer is male, about 28 years old and single or just recently married. About 25% have at least one child. He has a four-year college degree in industrial engineering, computer aided design or a related field, usually from an accredited technical school. Average starting salary is about \$40K plus benefits. Engineers with a graduate degree earn about \$10K more yearly. An engineer typically puts in a 48-hour work week.

Line Production Employee

Generally, Avalon line workers have a high school diploma or GED. They make approximately \$20K per year, plus benefits and overtime, on average; most employees work about 44 hours per week. Present numbers indicate that females account for just over 60% of our labor force in this area. Most are married with 58% having at least one child.

Marketing Coordinator

An employee in Avalon's marketing and public relations division is more likely to be male (65%) than female (35%), though these numbers seem to be reversing. He makes approximately \$30K as a starting employee, plus benefits, with a 42 hour work week on average. Typically, the employee has a four-year college degree in business, advertising or a related field. About half the employees in this sector are married, with 34% having one or more children.

with Avalon's resident loyal hound, but she does get exasperated with his 70s-style business acumen and failure to catch up to the real world in terms of technology and management, particularly when she's under stress. In fact, I'd say Booker could almost keep up with our own Queen Bitch in Training, Mollett. Anyway, this woman is good. She has a graduate degree from an Ivy League business school, about five year's topnotch experience and a superb grasp of trends in the toy industry. And she's fairly attractive in an early 30s, stodgy kind of way. But Ms. Booker doesn't strike me as the kind of woman who wants to use

her looks for anything, not even when there's something to be gained. She'd much rather outwit her opponent than sleep with him (or her). Booker is a real visionary, and Dial, whatever his real game, is fortunate to have her on his side. They seem to have a strong, collegial working relationship.

Ah, but the woman *does* have her vices. She smoked and snorted a fair share of dope in her undergrad days, and even though she's apparently beyond that, Booker does like her booze. I've dropped a quick note to the King boys to send her a complimentary case every now and then. If necessary,

Just to Spell it Out

If you're a fan of **Mage: The Ascension**, you probably heard some bells jangle in your head reading about Daniel Dial and his new visions for Avalon Incorporated. To give it to you straight, Dial is a fallen mage, a former Son of Ether inventor no less. He's not a *barabbi*, per se, but he's got some totally screwed up ideas about humanity. He had these ideas from the get go, way before Pentex entered his life (which might explain his failure to advance in his Tradition). Yep, he's a real nasty guy who got an offer from someone (or some *thing*, perhaps) about 15 years after he created Avalon and the company became a Pentex subsidiary. He snatched the proverbial golden goose when it was proffered and hasn't looked back.

So who is Daniel's benefactor? No telling for sure. Whatever the critter is, it feeds Daniel ideas about new toys and games to lock children into a developmental stasis. Having children turn into mechanical drones with no independent creativity suits its needs quite well. In its view, children are chaotic and unpredictable, difficult to mold into its ideal image of stasis. What better way to bring them under control as they grow into adults than to turn them into passive receptacles for its visions of what humans could be like? Daniel does not know his benefactor's true nature; he thinks his "mentor" may be some high-ranking Technocrat in either Iteration X or the New World Order interested in mass production of materials to influence Sleepers. And Daniel feels that since the Traditions turned their backs on him, why not dabble with the Etherites' former allies, the Technocrats?

While generally a willing catspaw for the being who inspires him, Daniel gets off track now and then because the Wyrms-controlled overseers at Pentex generally have an opposing view to anything smacking of the Weaver. They *want* Avalon's toys to breed chaos and unpredictability, violence and mayhem. Mollett made her timely visit to Memphis in part to see what the hell Avalon's CEO was doing. Her boss, Adrian Newberry, had hoped to see an even sharper increase in erratic child behavior. Turning kids into zombies has its place, but it should only be part of a larger scheme, in his mind, to transform them all into egocentric, ruthless little monsters. In any case, he and Mollett will keep an eye on Avalon.

Note that poor Marian and Gerald, for all their nervous tics and greedy habits, haven't a *clue* what their boss is really up to. They think he's a bit nuts, but pretty clever and not too unpleasant for all his eccentricities. They know about and support the destructive realities of Pentex and the company's general goals, but they're more in the dark about the Wyrms' backing and the Big Picture than their boss.

Kathryn Mollett realizes something is wrong with Dial; she just can't put a finger on it. She's well aware that Pentex has a *lot* of diverse connections with a myriad of weird beings, like the Black Spirals, the Sabbath and even some freakish family of fomori the House of Balor. She herself has hired shaytan assassins from the Circle of Red; making deals with nasty critters from other dimensions isn't beyond Mollett's reckoning. On the other hand, she's not a willworker and understanding the intricacies of True Magic and mage politics is outside her ken. Dial interests her precisely *because* he seems totally corrupt yet carries no discernible Wyrmtaint. It's a puzzle with no apparent solution, and Kathryn Mollett doesn't like riddles in her business.

As a Storyteller, you have several options with this plot thread. You can run with the story as it's presented here. Or you may decide to completely skip the mage, Weaver or Technocracy connections and just have Daniel be a run-of-the-mill Wyrms-corrupted corporation mogul; consider, for example, having Daniel controlled by the Urge Wyrms of Consumption, Khaaloooh, or in service to some other Wyrms entity that basks in greed. Then again, Daniel may just be an incredibly witty and subtle Wyrms agent; his interest in turning kids into single-minded little automatons is just his way of expressing the Wyrms' influence. In either case, Mollett's interest is probably just business as usual. Her probing questions are perfectly normal from a parent company exec keeping a close eye on a subsidiary. She may even want to recruit Daniel over to her team. An interesting complication here may be that he already works for Chase Lamont. What better opportunity to gain favor with Mollett's chief rival than to get on her good side and feed Lamont information? Daniel may even offer Mollett a large stock interest in the company just to gain her trust.

In short, use Avalon as best suits the interests of your players and ideas for future plotting in your chronicle.

I'm sure our own people in Special Projects could cook up something that would keep her walking a fine line.

Products

Avalon's toys are at the heart of its existence — and its nastiness. Daniel Dial may have begun the creation of sinister goodies for kids, but Marian Booker and the various designers have gleefully continued the process. While every design has to pass through Marian and ultimately Daniel, most of the designers find their best works are welcomed. If anything, they usually have more creative leeway than they'd hoped for. Both Daniel and Marian have occasionally taken a low-level designer's idea and used it as their own (after getting the poor sap to sign away any legal rights), but they keep this activity to a minimum in order to let the best and brightest creative minds churn out more ideas for icky toys. Unlike many Pentex subsidiaries, the top people at Avalon find it extremely easy to motivate their employees. Many of the product engineers and designers gladly put in extra time simply because they find the work so engrossing. Line production staff seem only slightly less eager, perhaps because they get profit sharing as well as free product samples. What they don't realize is that their percentage is meager compared to the enormous amounts of money Avalon brings in. Compared to non-Pentex corpo-

rations, the profit sharing is actually rather stingy. Still, for the average line worker, it's plenty to buy a few new Tellus games for the home computer or take the family out to O'Tolley's a couple times a week.

The following toys and games are some of Avalon's trademark products and best sellers. Storytellers should enjoy making up new items to gross out the players and shake up the characters.

Cici®

Cici and her friends Muffy, Emma (a British import) and Helena are Avalon's answer to Action Bill for girls. The Cici line are poseable 11" figures with a plethora of accessories, such as Cici's Cityscape Condo, Muffy's Mutt and Emma's Exercise Cycle. Needless to say, each doll has hundreds of blister packs of cool, hip clothing available. Each figure has its own individual style; Cici, for example, favors French *haute couture* while Muffy prefers traditional New England prep. But whatever the choice in clothes, all the figures are impossibly thin and out of proportion. What Avalon fails to mention is that any young woman with a shape like Cici and her pals would probably die of starvation, heart failure or other health complications. The tight clothes reflect this; a child has to really yank on Cici's jeans to pull them onto the figure.

Where other toy companies have balked at risqué themes among dolls, Cici and her pals sport tattoos, piercings, scantily short skirts and bare midriffs. A new development by Dial for this line has been the child-activated voice chip. Through use of the chip, Cici and her friends "learn" a child's name and eagerly carry on conversations about how important it is to be thin and pretty, not fat and ugly. When the child collects all the figures with voice chips, they'll eventually carry on their own conversations, exclusive of the kid, turning her into a passive observer in their dialogue.

Since the introduction of this product line in the early 1970s, Dial has issued a number of special collector's editions. One of the most popular was Post Nuclear Holocaust Cici, a doll sporting realistic radiation burns and a short, punkish haircut. Urban Commando Cici, toting a large gun as well as a huge bag of cosmetics, was also a huge hit. Future plans for Cici include more special editions (Cici the Government Interrogator), a clothing design CD-ROM from Tellus and an adults-only anatomically correct Cici. Much to Dial's disappoint, market research shows that an Action Bill/Cici crossover wouldn't be a big sale.

Action Bill®

The Action Bill line, based on the animated OmniTV show *Action Bill and the Danger Squad* (and the Vesuvius comic book of the same name), is one of the company's mainstays. And it's gone through a lot of changes. The most recent 11" figure is more high tech, svelte, articulated and muscled than ever, and each blister pack Action Bill always comes with some sort of nifty extra, like a mini-comic book on zipguns or a guide to basic computer hacking (all illus-

Commercial Script Draft

Daniel, this is a first draft; let me know what you think!

Marian

Announcer: New from Avalon...

Mother: I'm closing two plants. <draws card> I send ecoprotesters after...you! <indicates Brother>

Brother: <brandishes card> Hah! Defense contract! You can't touch me.

Sister: <rolls dice, moves counter across board; lands on corner box. Close up of "Bottom Line" logo in box> Oh, No! <smiles>

Mother, Father, Brother <to Sister>: What's Your Bottom Line? <all laugh>

Announcer: From the makers of Nuke 'Em and So What?, it's...BOTTOM LINE, the game of advancement and acquisition. As CEO of your own corporation, you must outdo the other companies by price gouging, hostile takeovers and sabotage. Make deals...and break them! Keep the stockholders happy! Hire child labor, conduct price wars, commit tax fraud, close plants and open new ones, all to bring in the best BOTTOM LINE.

BOTTOM LINE, An Avalon Game.

Marian, this is pretty neat stuff, but may be a bit over the top for some of the watchdogs. Can you get me a second draft and a storyboard that's got a bit lighter touch?

Thanks,

Daniel



trated with plenty of scenes of the hero). Action Bill and his secret agents fight bad guys around the world, especially the evil minions of W.O.L.F. The aim of the show is to twist children's notions of the consequences of violence. In spite of all the cool explosions, helicopter chases, fire-fights and kung fu battles, no one actually gets hurt, ever. The whole idea of cause and effect is simply glossed over. For this very reason, the producers of Action Bill have managed to ward off the anti-violence protesters.

The vast majority of the product line have no overtly harmful effects apart from siphoning off Mommy and Daddy's money (besides some two dozen action figures, there are vehicles and special weapons and videos and accessories and...you name it) and reinforcing the effect of the TV show. However, from time to time, Pentex has insisted on a more forceful approach; thus items like the Action Bill Special Police Badge (a fetish which helps children learn how to break the rules to get what they want — free with two proofs of purchase from any Action Bill product) are sprinkled among the standard merchandise. Dial has thus far resisted certain superiors' demands for an Action Bill Automatic Pistol which makes children want to play with a real 9mm, knowing that connecting Action Bill to gun violence in children would destroy the whole franchise. Avalon is currently perfecting its Official Action Bill website, another drain on any kid's brain.

Pocket Beasts

The brainchild of Marian Booker, Pocket Beasts are adorable little stuffed critters, part real-world animal and part fantastic monster. They're cute, squishy and cheaply priced. None of them carries any Wyrn-taint, but they're bait for greedy adults and children alike to take part in feeding frenzies, wherever they're sold. When the first Pocket Beasts hit the market, Marian sent out a number of "shoppers" from the Consumer Reaction Management department at Avalon to make sure the items sold like hotcakes. The handful of "shoppers" appeared in toy stores around the nation, and when the doors opened, they ran in and started screaming about the Pocket Beasts, offering 10 times the retail price to claim all of a certain variety (such as the Green Leo). Retailers were puzzled but delighted. They raked in extra profits, which in turn gave rise to a sharp demand in order from Avalon. That wasn't the best part, though, at least not to Marian Booker. She reveled in the reports of mob after mob trampling each other whenever a new wave of Beasts hit the market. Several dozen people have thus far been injured in the fights to get the newest Beasts on their first day of release. Much to Avalon's delight, the collectible Pocket Beasts market shows no signs of decline — a shrewd marketing campaign (featuring the slogan "Don't Let 'Em Get Away!") and a couple of remarkably addictive card and video games have made the property more valuable than ever.

Pet Pal

This electronic toy came out early in the digital pet craze. It's a calculator-shaped object with a large LCD screen and a series of buttons at the bottom, marked "Feed," "Water," "Play," "Scold" and "Clean." The "pet," usually a puppy (although kittens run a close second), barks, whines, jumps around and craps (the latter appears as an LCD lump; if left there, the puppy steps in it and begins to track up the screen. If not cleaned up each time, the "mess" begins to fill the screen). Like a real dog, it barks and whines when hungry, thirsty or craving attention, and the player must provide these day and night.

How this differs from the myriad other digital pets is truly nasty: the unstated objective is to let the animal die, by withholding food and water. When the pet barks or whines (and the hungrier it gets, the louder it gets), a good scolding will hush it up for a short while. Finally, after few days of depravation, it stops moving and becomes unresponsive. Shortly thereafter, the screen flashes and the pet is shown in color, with wings and a halo, sitting on a cloud and singing a beautiful tune. The message: it's okay to kill puppies and kittens from neglect, because they go to a happy place in the end. The newest editions of these cheap toys have multiple endings; a kid can restart the game and see the pet die in a new and different way, over and over again.

Some children make a game of dragging out the animal's final demise, feeding every couple of days rather than several times daily; the digital image slowly wastes away before the child's eyes. Needless to say, this is one of the products that the sadists on Pentex's Board of Directors love most.

Nuke 'Em

Dial is kicking himself for not coming up with this concept in the 1970s. Avalon, cashing in on the collectable card craze right under Black Dog's nose, merged playing cards with the standard board game to create Nuke 'Em, a best selling board game of atomic annihilation. This is a strategy game for two to six players, each taking the role of a nuclear-capable nation. Players can build up and deploy conventional and nuclear forces, as well as diplomatic and spy networks.

The game starts out with everyone at peace, free to move armies around, make alliances, practice espionage and so on. Everyone knows war will happen eventually, so the object at this stage is to be in the best position when your Defense Condition ("Defcon") reaches 0 and you have to launch missiles.

Eventually, greed for scant resources or influence, touchiness or simple belligerence results in small armed conflicts in third world countries. If the players are clever diplomats, they can get away with some brush wars. In theory, diplomacy can keep the game going forever, but Complication Cards (drawn each round) make winning by diplomacy impossible (i.e., "Opponent is caught infiltrating your Executive Branch; -1 to Defcon" or "Enemy ballistic missile sub sinks outside your largest harbor; -2 to Defcon").

When someone's Defcon reaches zero, they have to declare war on someone else. These two (and any allies) exchange strikes. This phase continues until one side is destroyed or incapable of action. Then Defcons are reset and the peace phase begins again. The game ends when one player is left with at least one city intact.

Last Christmas saw the first expansion set, detailing rules for fallout (allowing you to kill many more enemies), neutron bombs (reducing enemy populations and allowing occupation of the enemy cities) and missile upgrades. Next October will see the second expansion set, which includes Biological Warfare and state-sponsored terrorism (allowing someone to play non-nuclear countries).

Poopi Suzi

Targeting girls younger than the typical Cici collector, Poopi Suzi is a large, soft baby-size doll. She's remarkably lifelike and has her own line of clothes, though these are much more limited than Cici's. Suzi also comes with baby food, diapers and a bottle, and on recent shipments, Avalon has even supplied the two AA batteries. When these are installed, Suzi becomes more lifelike than ever. She cries constantly, and a kid never knows whether a diaper change, feeding or walking her around for hours is what will soothe the noisy doll, for her eating and crapping are eerily similar to a real baby. Removing the batteries will shut Suzi off, but the battery cover is almost impossible for clumsy little fingers to open. And the doll cries louder as the child messes with the cover, making it hard to concentrate. The only thing that quiets Suzi, at first, is shaking her vigorously. Eventually, even this won't shut her up. It takes the kid actively flying into a rage and slamming the doll against the floor or into a convenient wall to silence the wails. And then, Suzi is irreparably broken. Time for mom and dad to buy a new one.

Perhaps not surprisingly, more consumer watchdogs have screamed about Suzi than any other Avalon product. Sales have dropped sharply, and no amount of spin doctoring and marketing has improved matters. If Marian Booker and Daniel Dial can't come up with some new idea for the product, it will soon be a thing of the past at Avalon.

OmniTV's Mega Power Teen League Action Figures

Brad Berzerko, Mandy Maniaca, Enzo Excito and Pete Panick — they're the *Mega Power Teen League*! Despite the ridiculous names and the dull, repetitive plots, this show has become a huge hit on OmniTV, and Daniel Dial was delighted to get the contract on the action figure line. The four teens, all at Camelot High School, regularly fight Gordo Tanaki and his dog-men from the planet Zadoz, with advice from their mentor Doctor Denzi. Like dozens of other imitations, stories always involve some menace from Tanaki, a minor teen subplot and a huge battle between the suddenly giant Tanaki monster and the teens themselves in their giant anthropomorphic robot fighter, the Mega Power Thunder-Charged Champion of Justice. The show has recently

caused the former adolescent hit *Knights of Angst* to fall into cancellation, though a few characters have made the transition over to Camelot High. The Teen League figures look amazingly like the real-life characters, probably because the actors modeled for the Avalon designers and engineers. The show itself is chock full of sly sexual innuendoes; after all, why is Mandy the only girl shackled up with three teenage guys and some middle-aged scientist at the Mega Power Secret Base? Does she always wear those enticingly short skirts and halter tops? And does it make an impression on the kids that she's always the person to fix the Mega Power breakfasts while the guys get to polish their weapons? Several Asian-American groups have also protested the

MEMO

From: Daniel Dial

To: Marian Booker

Re: Adult Collector's Market

Apparently, the adults are turning into just as great a market as the kids. Put together a prospectus and profile on adults who collect toys for me, will you? I have some exciting ideas, such as an anatomically correct Cici and Action Bill, as well as some more mature action figures. These people will pay a *fortune* for hot items. I've attached a couple of newspaper and journal articles for our files.

MEMO

From: Marian Booker

To: Daniel Dial

Re: Adult Collector's Market Preliminary Prospectus

I think you're onto something big here. The average adult toy collector seems to be our ideal customer. Many have had some education beyond high school; most have dropped out of college because they were too "free-spirited" to put up with the rigors of academe. Thus they're intelligent but lazy and undisciplined. A few are independently wealthy, but the majority live at home with their parents and work part-time jobs in record or game stores, using all of their paltry resources to buy high-tech gadgetry, roleplaying games and yes, unique, one-of-a-kind toys. They'll eagerly spend every cent they have on these items, to the detriment of child support, clothes and even food.

I suggest our first adult collector's item should be a standout, a real toad strangler. How about a Cici and Action Bill Action Bike, complete with two well-endowed plastic, poseable figures? We might even include a mini-comic about Cici and Bill heading off to Las Vegas or Atlantic City. I know the projections for this product among the six to 12 crowd were unimpressive, but projections suggest it would be a big seller among the 18 to 23s. Let me know what you think, and I'll schedule a design team meeting.



ethnic stereotyping of Tanaki as a ruthless, heavily accented villain, without much success.

Avalon makes the action figures even more extreme than their TV counterparts. The plastic guns are bigger, Mandy's skirt is shorter and the action vehicles make twice as much noise. As with Avalon's other poseable figure lines, the Mega Power Teens have tons of accessories, like the Mega Power Secret Base, the Mega Power Thunder-Charged Champion of Justice (three feet tall!) and Moon Mission Expansion Set. Of course Mandy and the guys all have their own packs of clothing and cool sports vehicles, like Brad's SUV and Enzo's turbo-spike cycle.

Landscapes

Like most Pentex companies, Avalon looks pretty normal on the outside. No one driving by would suspect anything out of the ordinary at the corporate headquarters and production centers. The innards of these factories, though, contain more than meets the eye.

Corporate HQ

The Avalon corporate office, which houses upper-level management, marketing and public relations, and consumer reaction management, is an attractive five-story building in a Memphis industrial park. The physical plant is located in the basement, while the first floor has a reception area and an employee cafeteria; the central part of the building houses three elevator shafts and a stairwell. Floors two through four contain about 40 offices each and a number of small conference rooms. The fifth floor is the exclusive province of Dial, Booker and Brinegan, along with their support staff. It also holds several private conference rooms and an enormous board room that has the latest in home-theater technology. Admission to the fifth floor is via special pass only.

Regional Production Plants

The regional centers in Las Vegas, Atlanta, Chicago and Dallas are more or less similar to each other, with Las Vegas being the newest and currently most productive unit. Each factory has three floors. The top floor is for the preparation of raw materials, all bought from other Pentex companies like Good House and Rainbow Incorporated. The second floor is for product assembly, while the first floor is for detailing, packing and shipping. Attached to each center is also a more plush two-story office that houses engineering, regional management and product design and testing; at each center, there are about fifty offices, a small cafeteria and about a dozen conference rooms.

Security Overview

Although one does not think of a toy company as needful of protection as, say, a pharmaceutical corporation or a defense plant, Avalon has not neglected this aspect of their operations. Besides the constant threat of corporate

View from the Umbra

Should a pack of young Garou suspect Avalon Incorporated is a subsidiary of the Wyrms, chances are they'll gear up for a spirit world safari. Here's an overview to get the Storyteller started.

First off, the Umbral structure of the company varies depending on what section of each factory the characters visit. For example, from the Umbra the production factory floors look no different from any other — drab, gray and well-webbed (while not outright Bane spiders, the pattern spiders look none too healthy), with a few minor Banes to dampen the mood on the assembly lines.

The engineering section is another story. This is where the toys are conceived and prototypes tested. The foul stench of Wyrms taint is present in every corner. Few spirits are healthy here, and Banes hover nearby simply to bask in the subtle evils wrought by the "clever pranksters" who create these nasties.

The marketing section offices are quite sinister in the Umbra, enticing but deadly. A feeling of well being permeates the air, making all but the most focused among the intruders a little giddy and careless, as it is supposed to do. Pure water and sweet-smelling food poisons the consumer with foul taint. Garou may release a helpless spirit of Gaia from its cage only to see it shift into a horrendous Bane. Escape routes appear blocked by slime-covered pattern webs or guarded by fearsome beasts, while clear paths run deeper into the complex. It is a place of subtle traps.

With the mushrooming popularity of Avalon's products came an unsettling new development: the corruptive energies surrounding the company, combined with the "love" and belief which children direct at the toys, have allowed them to manifest as Umbral spirits. Intruders into the Umbral version of the main offices may find themselves surrounded by Action Bill and his friends (with very realistic assault rifles and grenades) or being seduced by an irresistible Cici. Since pre-production toys have no following, Garou won't have to deal with "Sally Squat-thrust" or "Lumberjack Jim with the Spring-loaded Chainsaw," both set for release in time for the Christmas rush. Thankfully, Pocket Beasts have not manifested, since greed and envy are associated with the stuffed animals more than love or belief.

espionage, both Pentex and Iteration X warn of dangerous miscreants who might target the company either because of its mission or its affiliation to the parent company. On-site security comes in three basic forms:

Human

In general, Avalon uses hired security guards to watch their plants and offices. They're not much different than what you expect to find in any corporate setting, although there tend to be more of them and they are a little better

equipped, with state of the art non-lethal capture equipment. Additionally, a handful of security specialists and undercover detectives watch the employees for any sign of disloyalty (a term which covers a broad spectrum of offenses, from selling design secrets to playing computer games on company time).

Under certain circumstances, such as when Pentex officials visit or powerful equipment is on site, Pentex "volunteers" to place better trained and equipped teams at Avalon's disposal. Such security may include First Teams or even Black Spiral Dancers.

Electronic

The electronic security at Avalon is much tighter than the human component. High-powered motion detectors, cameras, electronic eyes and even vibration detectors can be found in any sensitive area of the main office and the production centers. Special system diagnostics are run every 10 minutes or less in order to detect any tampering with the security systems. Most employees have chips on their ID tags, allowing them to be recognized by computer sensors located in all rooms and hallways. If an unauthorized person is located in a restricted area, a colorless knockout gas floods the area. Entranceways to more sensitive zones may have electrical grids to deliver nearly-lethal jolts, gel or foam to impede movement and cause suffocation, and fixed laser arrays to fry the intruder.

Special

In particularly sensitive areas, such as the executive offices and prototype testing facilities, intruders are in for a surprise. Stationed at key locations, larger-than-life animatronic robots of Action Bill and various members of his Danger Squad come to life when a breach is detected; at night, they frequently wander the halls on their own. The animatronics are actually modified cyborgs, known as Hyper Intelligence Technologies, Mark IV (or more commonly as HIT Mark IV, a model from the 1950s). Obsolete but still tough, these HIT Marks were purchased from Iteration X (operating through several fronts), who had no more use for them (some of the Technocrats thought it would be an interesting experiment to loose them on a wacko like Dial). Daniel Dial controls them from his office; only a tiny handful of executives know they are anything more than animatronic dolls, and Dial himself may not recognize their true nature. Dial loves these toys and is constantly tinkering with them. He's even used one as an attention grabber at toy conventions, where it gives a spiel in Action Bill's voice on how might makes right. To the delight of kids around the world, this thing speaks about eight different languages, according to whatever program is up and running. That's right, the Action Bill HIT Mark can tell a kid to lock and load in Japanese as well as English.

The HIT Marks are in constant connection with the computers monitoring the security grid. In the event of a security alert, the androids download data from cameras and sensors, and may order countermeasures to engage. Should

the connection fail unexpectedly, the Marks automatically go into alert mode, watching for any attack.

The Action Bill variant of the Mark IV appears to be an innocuous mannequin until it attacks. It may be programmed to give orders in the character's voice. The android is capable of reasoned thought, although it has no self-preservation instinct and will not retreat unless ordered to do so by its superiors (Dial or Iteration X) or upon completion of a specific mission.

Physical: Strength 5, Dexterity 2, Stamina 5

Social: Charisma 1, Manipulation 1, Appearance 2

Mental: Perception 2, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 2, Computer 2, Brawl 2, Intimidation 1, Linguistics (English, Spanish, French, German, Japanese), Research 2, Security 2, Technology 2

Willpower: 0

Health Levels: OK (x6), -1, Short-circuited

Armor Rating: 5

Attacks: Punch (difficulty 6, damage 6), Shock-touch (difficulty 6, damage 4 per charge, 5 charges); sonic stunner (200 decibels causes all within 20 yards to be incapacitated by pain unless ears are blocked; subtract 3 dice from all actions)

Some Final Notes for the Storyteller

Now that you've read through Avalon, let's talk more specifically about why werewolves would want to get involved in getting rid of this menace. What's here to interest them? Why should they care about nasty toys for *human* children? Surely no Garou child would even want an Avalon toy, would they? Well, kids are kids, even if they are Gaia's warriors at heart. What kind of werewolf would let her offspring play with something as nasty as Post-Nuclear Holocaust Cici?

First of all, a discernible Wyrms-taint is present all over Avalon. Once they leave the factories, the toys carry only the faintest scent of this taint, unless they're specially engineered (such as with the Action Bill Special Police Badge), in which case they're clearly Wyrms-riden. But the factories themselves, as well as many of the employees, openly reek of corruption and a distinctly foul stench. No loyal Garou is going to overlook this threat, even if it is from something as seemingly innocuous as a toy company. Moreover, if any werewolves should discover that Avalon is a Pentex company, that should be enough to spur all of them to action.

Secondly, werewolves may find themselves in a position where they must protect humans from Avalon's subtle brainwashing and corruption. Yeah, the Red Talons probably won't give a damn, but the Children of Gaia certainly will. And if they can bring along some muscle from other tribes, so much the better. The Children of Gaia understand better than anyone else that the tainting of humans is ultimately a threat to everyone.



Finally, there's the issue of Kinfolk. More than the Garou, perhaps, these are the folks likely to be the most hapless victims of Avalon. Picking out toys for Christmas, Hanukkah or birthdays, they're just as vulnerable as any other consumer to Avalon's clever marketing. At first glance, Cici *looks* like a neat doll; a Pocket Beast is a cute stuffed animal. It's what comes later that's the problem.

Just to get your creativity flowing, here are a few story seeds for using Avalon in an ongoing Werewolf chronicle.

On the First Day of Christmas

Sales of Avalon toys naturally skyrocket around the holiday season... and so, oddly enough, do stories of kiddie violence. In a small town close to the werewolves' sept, a couple of children dressed up in their Action Bill Danger Team play clothes, complete with their Special Police Badge, have killed the local town bum with a pickax. Police are stunned that something like this could happen in their town. Unknown to them, though, is that the bum was a Bone Gnawer Kinfolk. Whether or not the local Garou get along with that tribe, trouble with Kin shouldn't be ignored. The werewolves can launch their own investigation, which should eventually lead to the Bane-infested badges and perhaps straight to Avalon.

The Factory Smell

Whether they've gotten a whiff of Avalon's nastiness in the previous adventure or just happen to notice the

factoryscape in the Umbra, eventually the werewolves will probably want to attack and destroy an Avalon production center. How will they do this? Running in and simply blowing the place up is always a fun option, but you may want to quietly suggest that they'd find out more about the company and its goals with some recon work. *Then* they can have a big fight with Dial's special security guards and any local Banes hanging around.

Stepford Children

When the werewolf player characters return from a mission, tired and wounded, they don't think much about kindly Aunt Mary, the Kinfolk who watches over the young Garou and Kin, suddenly departing on urgent personal business, leaving the kids to fend for themselves. But when the kids start acting like little zombies, the sept knows something is up. What could be turning them into such automatons? Who's responsible? There's no Wyrmscent in the air. Well, as long as they're playing with their Cici and Action Bill Voice-Chip dolls, they're probably okay... This is a character-intensive game wherein the werewolf parents discover that their kids are being slowly brainwashed into dull passivity by their dolls that do all their talking (and thinking) for them. Note that when the adults try to take away the toys, the kids will go ballistic. Should be a fun fight, since claws and fangs around Garou before their First Change and Kinfolk are a *bad* idea.

EXIT WOUND

THE DOCTOR

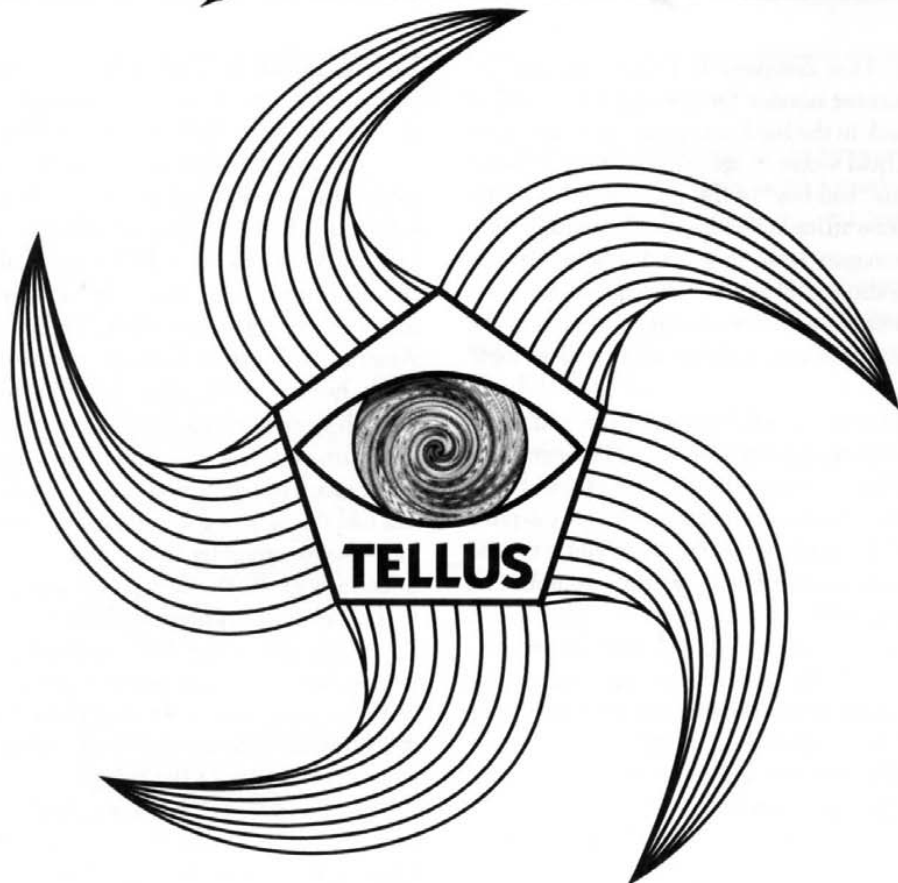
BIOLOGICAL
WARFAIR

ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL

RAVAGE

SPECIAL
CLASSIC EXTRA!
BURGERTIME





"Spin, fire, die die die!"

— Opening line from a joystick print ad

Sirs, I certainly don't want to waste your time today, but I think that the media has perhaps blown things out of proportion of late — something I'm sure you all have much more experience with than I do.

I believe very strongly that violence in video games does not produce a lust for violence in real life. The same is true for any medium of entertainment. Look at the changes in the movie industry and on prime-time television; are they in fact a cause of today's crime rate? I think they aren't. Such problems stem from factors like drug abuse — and, if you'll pardon my brazenness, we don't exactly target the drug addict with our games. He doesn't have the spending money.

What we do is provide a release, and more importantly, a safe release. The lines between reality and fantasy are very clearly defined. We in the computer game industry, and at Tellus Enterprises in particular, are committed to keeping those boundaries unmistakable. Real life is obviously no video game, sirs; our customers know this very well, and that's at the heart of the product's appeal. Our customers aren't cyborgs or knights in armor or futuristic cops — they're ordinary people, who just want to pretend for a while, and then return to the safety of their real lives. You see, with a video game, once you're done jetting around in a spaceship blasting little green men, you can turn off the game and walk away. It doesn't stay with you.

— Abraham Riegel, CEO of Tellus, addressing the Senate Subcommittee on Violence in Video Games

It's Not Just a Game It's Your New Reality

Lose Yourself

Overview

In today's world of "bigger, faster, more," where the masses want their entertainment conveniently packaged and wholly cathartic, one company stands head and shoulders above its peers when it comes to delivering electronic

means of release. That company is Tellus, the software magnate that's become notable for the frenzied, hard-hitting games that suck in the hard-core gamer and the casual player alike. In a field where image is everything, Tellus is unquestionably the "bad boy" of the video game industry, reveling in its wisass attitude and unprecedented appeal to older kids and teenagers (emotional and otherwise). Remarkably, they're also a publisher of educational software, made available at cheap rates for schools (although in the *World of Darkness*, you can imagine what said schools' budgets are like).

And as far as blurring the line between reality and games goes, Tellus is on the absolute bleeding edge. Their graphics technology captures colors in just the right hues; their physics engines are the envy of most other studios. When you put a bullet in an enemy's head during a Tellus game, you're treated to the most accurate representation of entry wounds, exit wounds, blood spray and knockdown available. In fact, it's a little joke among certain Pentex high-ups that the remarkable verisimilitude of Tellus' goriest offerings is due to the program teams' penchant for slipping out and murdering people on the sly "in the name of research."

As usual, they've got that wrong.

They're thinking of the CEO.

History

Like most other software publishers, Tellus is a relative newcomer to the corporate playground. It was founded by a wiz kid programmer with resources aplenty in 1985, before most people had ever heard of Nintendo. The company was only a dozen or so people at its origin, but it managed to hold its own. Tellus started out playing the market for whatever was popular; first it was the Commodore 64, then games for the various Apples and IBM clones, and so on. When the market began to peter out, they accepted their losses and held in there, managing to stay the course when other companies were dropping like flies.

Tellus really started coming into its own, however, with the 1989 release of *Downfall*. One of the few puzzle games to actually hold its own against the mighty Tetris, *Downfall* hooked thousands of gamers for hours and hours on end. Tellus sank the money provided by *Downfall* and its nigh-innumerable sequels into further game research, even hiring on a psychologist consultant for a while to help provide insight into what sort of games would catch a player's attention and hold it. It was about that time that Tellus' owner and guiding visionary, Abraham Riegel, started casting about for possible investors — and met Danforth Stern. The two hit it off from the beginning, and before long, Tellus was neatly under Pentex's wing.

In 1992 Tellus acquired an ailing Japanese publisher, Tetsumomo Studios, that was losing the fight for recognition and profits in the fiercely competitive market. Tetsumomo underwent the expected restructuring and became known as Tellus of Japan. With the new influx of

backing, as well as a fresh new vision for product lines with an "edge," Tellus of Japan gradually grew far more successful than Tetsumomo Studios had ever been.

(As an interesting side note, this was a highly exceptional thing; it was and is far more frequent for successful Japanese publishers to buy out ailing American studios than vice versa. The fact that Tellus was healthy enough to pull this off alarmed some stateside publishers, but encouraged many others; for a little while, Tellus was the toast of the American software industry for their patriotic accomplishment. Just one more point of prestige for the company...)

The software industry has become a brutal business of late, with sadly few companies able to hold on to what they have, much less grow and thrive. As the exception, Tellus has had the pick of the remains; whenever a new development house crumbles into bankruptcy, Tellus can always offer a new spot to the most promising survivors. And thanks to the high industry prestige Tellus enjoys, few of the people they really want refuse. This has made things even better for Tellus; the newcomers usually pour their hearts into their work, creating new and better properties to be milked to death before their creators burn out and quit — and, of course, Tellus retains the rights.

In late 1997, Tellus bought out the struggling Sunburst Enterprises International, a fellow Pentex subsidiary who'd fallen on hard times. Tellus got Sunburst's assets and choice employees at a bargain price, and Sunburst got a much-needed shot in the arm (after the requisite round of restructuring, of course).

Nowadays, Tellus is in fantastic shape. Thanks to their (almost literal) computer wizardry, they are one of the top two contenders in the home console race. The recent introduction of their 128-bit machine, the Typhoon, kicked the "next generation console" race into overdrive. Ads for their games, featuring the "Eye of the Storm" catchphrase and the parting image of the Tellus Electronic Eye (usually at the heart of the Typhoon logo) glowing softly on a black field, run regularly during sports programs, cartoons, teen angst dramas and other high-impact advertising blocks. Kids line up at the local stores to get the latest Tellus offerings on release day, and even Sunburst is doing rather nicely, if not exceptionally.

All in all, it's great news for Tellus — and bad news for the public at large.

Organization

Despite the highly profitable nature of the industry, Tellus is far from a sprawling, monolithic entity. In fact, much of its structure revolves around its CEO, who by force of personality and reputation has gained Tellus much of its current industry prestige. However, unlike the majority of company figureheads, Riegel is actually pretty competent at both management and electronic wizardry. He and his "elite" have an iron lock on all the power at the company, which means that very little goes on that escapes their notice.

Technobabble

To adequately get across the intense nature of technogeek fandom and the products therein, it might be worthwhile to pick up some of the lingo. Real video game freaks — the ones who reserve games as soon as the store's taking orders, get off work to be first in line on major release days, and spend whatever time they're not spending on their games writing FAQs, reading walkthroughs cover-to-cover, and talking game specs across the Internet — have a particular jargon all their own. Although it'd certainly be overkill to try to memorize a gaming magazine from cover to cover, a little awareness of this jargon and how it's used could help convey to your players the frenetic, tech-obsessed nature of this particular consumer base.

(Some of you may already be immersed in this subculture, and already know exactly what we're talking about. In that case, you're already ideally prepared to run a Tellus story. Have fun.)

One of the best ways of preparing for a Tellus-themed session is to go browsing through a videogame newsgroup for a while (`rec.games.video.sony` and `rec.games.video.nintendo` are a fine start; you'll surely find others) and start collecting buzzwords. You don't have to be personally familiar with the facts of a video game's polygon count, camera tweaking, slowdown or texture mapping — plenty of people are willing to complain about these things on the Internet without even understanding what they're talking about. They're buzzwords, and they sound good, and they make the speaker sound intelligent (well, theoretically), so who cares whether your facts are straight or not? People will pay attention to you if you post something with an all-caps subject line with twenty exclamation points, no matter how little you actually know about your subject.

Video game magazines can also provide some insight, although they're a little more of an investment. Still, it

can prove worthwhile to read the letters pages, technical spec sections, and reviews to get something of a feel for what turns a video gamer on, and how exactly he'd describe the feeling.

The following are a few particular catchphrases to toss out here and there; there are certainly more worth using, but you'll probably get the most mileage out of these.

E3: The Electronic Entertainment Expo, essentially the biggest convention in the industry. Companies often work their programming schedules around timing the E3 announcements, because that's where the white-hot buzz gets started. Advanced hardware, flashy software and rapidly smiling booth babes are the hallmarks of this convention, and any fan worth the title would sell their sister to get in and see the latest games before anyone else.

ToA: Tellus of America. Hard-core video geeks *always* pay attention to whether or not the American development house is translating their Japanese favorites, so the "in the know" crew tends to litter their emails, websites and magazine articles with discourses on what ToA and ToJ are up to. Tellus' detractors (usually the diehard Sega, Sony and Nintendo addicts), as well as Tellus' fans who style themselves "witty," tend to use the abbreviation "TnA" instead.

ToJ: Tellus of Japan. Considered by some fans to be the only company that publishes games worth having.

Twitch games: Games that demand quick reaction speed rather than planning, like shooters. Fans like to defend these games by claiming that they promote hand-eye coordination and quick thinking. Glass Walkers everywhere sleep easier knowing that if the Apocalypse can be averted by a pair of quick thumbs, the youths of the world have got the problem licked.

Tellus of America is based in the north part of California, within reasonable distance of the heart of the electronics industry, but sufficiently far from LA and other truly large cities that if something horrible were to happen, Tellus wouldn't be in the heart of an urban warzone. Its main complex is of comfortable size, far more notable from the Penumbra (as the iridescent labyrinth it is) than from the physical world. It's here that most in-house work gets done, although many executives telecommute more often than not, and the various development houses who work for Tellus visit only on occasion.

Tellus has three subdivisions of particular note: Tellus of Japan (based some forty miles out of Osaka), Tellus of Europe (centered in Manchester, England), and Sunburst Enterprises (located in Silicon Valley). The first two are devoted to game design, although Tellus of Europe finds

itself translating games more often than innovating new games of its own. Sunburst continues to manufacture hardware, and the occasional piece of business software.

As far as relations to the Board of Directors goes, the deterioration of Danforth Stern's psyche has meant a similar loss in Tellus' "favored son" status. However, with one patron weakening, others are licking their chops waiting for the chance to snatch up the super-profitable Tellus as their own pet project. Chase Lamont wants to act as Tellus' new sugar daddy as part of his eventual absorption of Stern's position; Kiro Yamazaki would like to have Tellus at his disposal as a means of patching his own hemorrhaging influence; Francesco wants Riegel for tribal purposes; Kathryn Mollett just doesn't want Lamont to have any more personal power than he does. For now, Riegel is content to play them off one another; he doesn't really care who he has to deal

with, so long as they're a winner and can guarantee Tellus the breathing room to do what they do best.

Sunburst

Once one of the promising up-and-comers in the personal computer market, Sunburst Enterprises International is now a shadow of its former self, a gutted and reassembled subdivision of Tellus. Sadly enough, Sunburst has no one to blame for their misfortune but themselves—or, more accurately, their former CEO, Donald Waits. Waits was a decidedly unlovely and markedly porcine man whose business practices were as piggish and short-sighted as his daily routine. Waits was enamored of the Omega Plan and the “special” resources placed in his hands by the Board of Directors, and enthusiastically took to his role in corroding the world. “A Bane in every computer” would have been his personal slogan, if he’d really had any idea of just what those “sublimating subroutines” he was implanting in his products were. Subtlety? Never heard of it! Hey, can you make this one even nastier?

As a result, Sunburst home computers became infamous throughout the industry for being even more unreliable and perverse than you could reasonably expect a PC to behave. To be sure, they had their strong points, but too many consumers complained of migraines, extreme user-unfriendliness, irreparable disk crashes and other ills—and rightly so. The Banes sealed in Sunburst hardware, tiny though they were, exuded a malign influence that made working on a Sunburst a living hell. Word got around, and the customer base simply fell off.

Tellus’ buyout of Sunburst has given the company a new lease on life, but not without a cost. Most of the employees were laid off in the restructuring. Waits himself was quickly replaced, and nobody’s heard anything from “the Big Pig” since. (A particularly nasty rumor amongst Pentex employees “in the know” is that Waits had a... prominent place in the celebratory luau that Riegel held shortly after the takeover.)

Nowadays, Sunburst serves a dual role for its patron, Tellus. For one, it’s a handy source of serviceable hardware at discount prices; it certainly helps Tellus’ productivity to be able to commission custom-designed equipment easily, depending on their needs. Secondly, Sunburst is more or less on the cutting edge of hardware design, specializing in making computers more user-friendly; what they can’t manage in available genius they make up for in industrial espionage. Since the takeover, they’ve been nicely solvent and have been steadily catching up with the other big boys of personal computing. This rapid development has made Sunburst a hot commodity on the stock market, and most industry insiders are watching the company closely. In effect, Sunburst is a handy distraction: Tellus is able to get away with a few more things than they ordinarily could, because the people watching for “Wurmish” activity tend to ignore the software side of things and scrutinize the hardware industry, since “that’s where all the real innovations are happening.”



Sunburst makes most of its money off a typically nepotistic relationship with other Pentex subsidiaries; Sunburst supplies the offices of the majority of Pentex's holdings. Only in areas where computer efficiency must be at its peak (such as Magadon's labs) do the employees work on computers a touch more reliable than Sunburst's. Perhaps the most telling fact of all is that while much of Tellus' "grunts" and less valued employees are given Sunburst applications, the truly valuable staff works with the best stuff the industry has to offer. Even so, Riegel himself uses a Sunburst machine with pride — but given that he's reengineered it from the motherboard up and bound the most reliable spirits he could find into it, the technofetish that is the Doc's personal machine is hardly representative of the company's product.

Tellus of Japan

The company formerly known as Tetsumomo has done quite nicely for itself since being brought under the Tellus aegis — in a financial sense, that is. The seeds of corruption that take root in every Pentex subsidiary have rooted just as deeply in Tellus' Japanese branch, and it's starting to show in subtle places. But from a public point of view, Tellus of Japan is a success story, an example of a faltering company turned into an effective, dynamic, and very prominent enterprise.

ToJ's main role is to give the corporation a stake in the key Japanese marketplace. Although it's the console industry that is really key over there, Japan turns out a lot of games in a year, from the traditional sports, shooters and fighting game offerings to puzzle games, "survival horror," lots of roleplaying games and even stranger offerings like "dating sims." This last category involves the player interacting with a number of digital women, trying to figure out puzzle-fashion what "turn-ons" and behavior they can use to finally start dating one of them. The very concept tickles American Tellus high-ups no end; to date, one of the biggest covert projects currently running is the quest to make "dating sims" not only acceptable, but popular in the West. The very thought of applied behavior modification techniques in a game that might well be a key influence about how a player deals with the opposite sex — it sends shivers down board members' spines just to think about the demented possibilities.

A Worthy Cause

It's a fact of the computer industry that obsolescence comes very quickly. A hardware manufacturer can find itself with a warehouse full of machines that are only six to eight months old, but already out-of-date and largely unsalable. No manufacturer can afford to have them taking up space, much less being taxed for them. Sunburst is no different, and like most other manufacturers, will offload their older hardware as a tax write-off. And like most other manufacturers, they have a perfect place to deposit their mildly tainted product that also provides great PR in the process:

They donate the stuff to schools.

But like many other Japanese publishing houses, ToJ publishes plenty of material that eventually finds its way to American shores. ToJ's specialties include the ever-popular fighting games, as well as a number of RPGs with distinctly dubious — that is, "mature" — content. Given the rather more open attitude toward nudity and almost pedophilic fetishes in Japan, publishers can put things on the market that would be restricted to adult specialty shops in the States. Of course, the most extreme of these games don't get translated into English (and for that matter, are usually third-party affairs with only a tenuous paper trail back to ToJ). Even so, they're a red-hot property among US gamers who purchase import games.

ToJ's RPGs tend to be moody endeavors, filled with involved monster-summoning graphics, villains with the theme of "innocence corrupted" (in other words, often resembling civilians or children), and heroes who must embrace their darker halves in order to save the day. Their fighting games are, like everything else with the Electronic Eye logo slapped on it, state-of-the-art in terms of character design and visceral elements. Oh, and fairly brutal, of course. ToJ does some license work, usually for darker anime series like *Burn Fist Summoning*, but they've recently acquired a rather "lighter" license. With the help of a few disgruntled programmers who used to work for a rival company, ToJ has also turned the already lucrative license of "Pocket Beasts" into a devilishly innocent-seeming, quite absorbing and fully profitable video game series.

The Technocracy and Tellus

Mage-savvy Storytellers might be wondering why the Technocracy itself hasn't shown an interest in Tellus Enterprises. After all, the video game industry makes tons of money, which would reasonably interest the Syndicate, and is a possible venue to manipulating the Masses, as the NWO might consider. Tellus would seem like a prize prospect, right?

Well, yes and no. You see, as much money as the video game business does, it's still basically peanuts next to, say, Microsoft. As a result, the Syndicate is rather more interested in "practical" applications that would appeal to everyone, particularly the more business-minded purchaser. Forget Richard Garriott — the Syndicate wants Gates in their pocket.

More significantly, though, "Doc" Riegel is aware of the Technocracy's existence, even though he doesn't fully understand what they're really all about. So to play it safe, he plays up the Sunburst division as where the real cutting edge in home computing is. Using both mundane rumormongering and judicious spirit-hacking, Riegel carefully makes it seem to "the true insider" that Sunburst is where the next big breakthrough — for instance, the thing that will make CDs and DVDs look faddish — will happen. So far, the Technocrats who care have bought it hook, line and sinker.

The Electronic Agenda

Like their distant associates at OmniTV, Tellus is in the business of desensitization. For them, this doesn't necessarily mean throwing multiple gory gobbets at their audience (figuratively speaking, of course) until they've removed even the slightest flinch — although, of course, they'll certainly deliver the "bloodiest fatalities in the business" if that's what the fans seem to accept. Their agenda includes not only desensitizing kids of all ages to violence and atrocity via a video-game format, but also very subtly fostering an open attitude towards theft and piracy.

In a way, Tellus products are kind of like drugs, or at least the titles really in demand are. Once you've started exploring all the missions for *Slaughtercraft*, it's really hard to turn back to any other kind of entertainment. Their games are damnably addictive, and Tellus neatly times expansions to coincide with the time that a player might finally be wringing the last few drops of gameplay out of a title. As a result, more and more people are spending obsessive amounts of time in front of their computers and consoles, instead of out learning to relate to real people. When the Omega Plan finally requires Tellus to "pull the plug," as it were, there'll be a whole lot of people out there who have totally lost their sense of direction and are going to need some guidance. And guidance is exactly what Pentex will provide.

Despite the hopes of certain Pentex higher-ups, violence in video games doesn't necessarily lead to a desire for violence in real life. However, it does have an acceptable secondary effect, particularly where Tellus' games are concerned; it ups the stakes, leading to a desire for more violence in the games themselves. Gamers *love* to see more blood and more gobbets, preferably with as little pixelization and as high a framerate as possible. It's the Board's hope that this increasing scale of "bigger, faster, bloodier, *more*" will, along with an increase in television and movie violence, desensitize the public to violence in general, leaving holes in their spirits for corruption to seep in. So far, they've been patient about waiting for results; if impatience strikes, then it'll be child's play to start planting more Banes in the software.

Even so, inciting violence is only part of Tellus' plans for widescale behavior modification. Sure, certain patterns of light can induce seizures in certain viewers, but what good does that do, really? Instead, certain Tellus programmers are experimenting with patterns that would affect the emotional centers of viewers, enhancing whatever reaction is necessary from rage to suggestibility. And the ever-popular subliminal messages are often on managers' "to do" lists, even though they're seen as a *passé* concept among most of the programmers in on this portion of Tellus' operations.

(As a side note, one of Tellus' most covert "black projects" of the moment is research into some sort of psychotropic subroutine that could induce frenzy in shapechangers or similarly susceptible beings, thus causing some very nasty cases of domestic violence right in the heart of the enemy's

home. If this one succeeds, there could be multiple cases of doting Kinfolk families torn apart by their berserk Garou children in the throes of a psychotic First Change.)

In a particularly ironic twist, Tellus also has a very covert plan to *encourage* software piracy — after all, Riegel reasons, not only does that promote a general rejection of government and authority, but it undercuts their rivals' sales as much as their own, if not more so. Of course, it should go without saying that this little side venture is absolutely, positively, *not* common knowledge even at the management level. The employees would naturally revolt if they learned that Tellus was undercutting their livelihoods in the name of some "greater scheme." Besides, this way whenever someone on Tellus' payroll swipes an office-registered piece of software for home use, or distributes a cracked version of a rival team's project to the Internet, it's *his* idea. Another hook in another soul....

As a result of all this savvy, Tellus has catapulted itself into a position as a worldwide leader in electronic entertainment, rivaling even Sony and Nintendo in eking quarters out of kids and dollars out of their parents. Their products are slick and in demand, their executives have great big fat bank accounts, and plenty of glossy magazines fawn over the latest Tellus product in hopes of scoring more Tellus advertising dollars. Most of Pentex's Board of Directors is flatly stunned that such a "newfangled fad" could spawn such an incredible amount of revenue *and* offer such inroads into the consumer's very spirit. With only a few exceptions (like Chase Lamont), the Directors don't really understand Tellus' success — but they sure do like it.

Products

Tellus splits its focus between games for the personal computer and games for their home consoles; both divisions are very well supported, and viable competitors in their respective fields. It would be folly to try for a complete list of Tellus' diverse offerings; frankly, a catalog of all their products would take up twice as much room as this very chapter. Instead, the following are just a few of the more notable offerings that Tellus has made available to the buying public. Feel free to elaborate as much as you like; a quick glance around the local software store proves that more products come out every week, many quickly forgotten, so have fun devising ship schedules of your own.

Tellus just doesn't program for children who are around the kindergarten level or so; they figure that Avalon has that demographic sewn up, and it's really hard to sneak their "special touches" past the watchdog groups to children of such a tender age. No, no "Action Bill's Letter Adventure" for the preschoolers — yet. (Of course, Riegel has his eye on how the preschooler software market plays out; you can bet that as it grows, Sunburst will certainly start offering subtle little "pack-ins" for the computerized family!)

Instead, Tellus' games begin at the six-to-eight-year-old market, and — surprisingly enough — are almost always "educational" in nature at this level, particularly focusing on



FEAR THE UNKNOWN

DEATHMIST

LOKOS of the CRYPT II



ecological games like *A Wolf's Life* and *The Big Pond*. Although Pentex brass was initially rather dubious of such an effort, Riegel soon helped them see the light. The sinister beauty of these offerings is that they don't sugarcoat Nature's redness in tooth and claw. They gradually teach children that to get ahead, certain animals *have* to kill to survive, and as often as possible in order to keep healthy (the games' major variation from real life is that they imply predators will gladly kill for sport or when they aren't hungry). The subliminals usually guide children down one of two roads—either the children really come to enjoy swallowing the smaller fish, or the youngsters become so convinced of Nature's ruthlessness that they don't want anything to do with the outdoors. Either way, Pentex is happy, and has approved Tellus' plans to develop more educational software with hidden messages.

The hardest-hitting, most high-impact product in Tellus' arsenal to date is the Tellus Typhoon, a 128-bit machine with a DVD drive, backwards compatibility, and a moderate reputation for overheating. Although not quite the most technically advanced console of its type, it has the dual advantage of being pretty easy to program for, and a highly successful marketing blitz behind it. So its analog controller is a little fragile, and the memory cartridges are expensive. So it doesn't work well at all with third-party accessories, having a tendency to fry itself when cheaper controllers or peripherals are hooked up. It's pretty cheap, and it's got a lot

of games available, and its in-house games are considered the authority on "mature" gameplay. For all of those reasons, it's the teenager's console of choice, and is rated pretty highly among older gamers who like to watch heads explode and call it "mature fare."

The games programmed by Tellus' PC division are relatively standard in concept (first person shooters like *Exit Wound*; dark fantasy adventure such as *Lords of the Crypt*, and so on). Of course, Tellus insists on adding that special "Tellus touch." This typically means one or two gameplay features that competitors haven't utilized, but more importantly, that means production values. The character design in Tellus' more popular offerings is top-notch, the environments are remarkably moody, the soundtracks are spine-tingling, and the monsters genuinely frightening. The really hard-core gamers tend to scoff at Tellus' PC arsenal as good-looking but overall nothing really new (of course, nothing's really new to these guys, who spend more time dreaming about the next technological upgrade than playing games built with the current technology). But the casual gamer, for his part, eats up Tellus product with a fork and knife. And there is, of course, one particular piece of programming that stands out, although few people recognize it for the engineering marvel that it truly is.

Tellus is savvy enough to know a good thing when they see it, so they were naturally into the online gaming craze as

quickly as anyone else. Their particular offering, though, isn't another one of the endless Dungeons & Dragons-style fantasy settings complete with aggravated hobbits and color-by-numbers dragons. Instead, Tellus' major online game is *Terminus*, a game of "dark modern fantasy." Set in a grim near-future urban environment, the game takes place in a city that's nearly the size of a New England state. Various "boroughs" take the place of cities and mountain ranges; the monsters roaming the "countryside" are a mix of demons escaped from hell, mutants, supernatural creatures like vampires and zombies, killer cyborgs, sorcerous cultists and even ordinary people. Characters learn to survive in this urban labyrinth by mastering skills of stealth and assassination, by becoming weapons masters with stockpiled arsenals, by learning how to use forbidden occult power, or by personal augmentation at a cybernetic or bio-reengineering clinic. Naturally, *Terminus* is a lot more prophetic than most people think. It's how a cadre of programmers saw, through Bane-touched, fevered dreams, their own prophecy of the Apocalypse.

And although *Terminus* is as successful as any other game in capturing the obsession of the public (often moreso, as players are willing to spend hours and hours gathering the money and experience to advance "just one more level" before they go to bed), the true nature of the program is even more sinister than that. *Terminus* is a screening process of sorts, a means for Tellus to keep track of players with... "potential." The game periodically scores players (without their knowledge) based on the sorts of actions they take during the game; for instance, are they desperate enough when starting out (or mean-spirited enough later on) to murder noncombatant civilians for lunch money? Do they willingly sign up for "body augmentation" at the various body clinics around Terminus City in order to get the extra power they crave? Do they generally play with the sort of cold pragmatism that Pentex values? These scores are cross-referenced with a quick credit check (after all, most players pay for their online time via credit card), and the data are regularly compiled and sent to Pentex. The names who stand out for both their novel approach to "problem-solving" situations and a credit history that would imply a willingness to work for Pentex in an appropriate capacity become a very specialized "calling list," distributed to various subdivisions of Pentex who are interested in such a thing. Many a valuable potential fomor who wouldn't otherwise have been discovered has come to Pentex's attention by putting in those extra hours in Terminus City.

And, of course, Tellus also offers plenty of new toys for dimly-lit arcades and smoky pool halls everywhere. They leapt on the fighting-game craze as quickly as possible, answering *Street Fighter II* and *Mortal Kombat* with such properties as *Brawl Devil* (currently in its 4th incarnation as *Brawl Devil Giga*), where players take the role of supernatural monsters trying to knock each other's blocks off, and *Gang Beating* (with nicely simulated broken bottles, switchblades and similar weapons). The home ports of these games have done quite nicely, although for many fans,

there's still nothing like rushing to the arcade, roll of tokens in hand, to master the latest punchfest before everyone else.

One final note: It's worth stressing that this industry is big. Although a game doesn't cost as much as a big-budget Hollywood movie, many cost enough to fund ten or twenty independent films. The first football game for Tellus' Typhoon platform cost about twenty-five million dollars, including endorsement costs and the like. In 1998, although Sony reaped much more revenue from its other products, the Playstation generated more out-and-out profit than all of Sony's other enterprises combined. Although Tellus is far from being a hand-over-fist moneymaker in the league of Endron or OmniTV, it's a plenty profitable venture, making more than enough money to fund all sorts of unpleasant electronic research projects on the sly. Although not Microsoft by any means, Tellus is worth watching.

Methodology

Overall, Tellus embraces the rapid development frenzy of the software industry, gladly going along with the public's incessant demands for "bigger, faster, more!" Frankly, that suits the highest-ups' ends pretty well; if the Omega Plan is going to work, then a healthy dose of technoshock is in

Game Ratings

All mass-market video games these days are rated, much like movies, through the independent Entertainment Software Ratings Board. This scale, which ranges from generic labels like "Everyone" to limiters like "Teen" or "Mature," is the industry's major concession to concerned parents. The board is relatively strict, although given the amount of software they must review, a few scenes that might otherwise require a higher rating do slip through.

In the real world, of the games actually rated by the ESRB, only 1% or so classify as "Adults Only"; this figure is more like 3-5% in the World of Darkness. Tellus is responsible for some of these, but is hardly the only offender — backlashes against political correctness have created a high demand for entertainment that's crude, sexy and violent, so software companies being what they are, make what sells.

Interestingly enough, no console manufacturer to date (well, as of this book's date of publication) has approved an "Adults Only" game; those have appeared only for personal computers. Tellus would love to "upgrade" the market to a situation where adult games are commonly accessible for game consoles, but Riegel doesn't want to make the first move. There's still the chance that it would attract some unwanted Garou attention, after all, so it's much better to wait until Sony or Sega (or even Nintendo) decides to go after the adult market, takes all the flak, and opens it up for them. Until then, well, there's always pirated under-the-table "betas"....

order. Tellus spearheads research to bring computers into every aspect of a customer's life, preferably nudging the public into becoming more and more reliant on their electronics. User-friendly is a keyword; lazy people deserve computers, too, and Joe Average just shouldn't have to put any effort into learning what a program *does* before he's able to use it. (Riegel likes to underline this point at board meetings by pointing out the success of AOL.)

Modern society seems to be fulfilling Tellus' hopes rather nicely. Every year, Tellus seeds a number of "problem areas" into their products, and every year they're rewarded with more stringent and panicked cries from a customer base that's increasingly unable to think for themselves. When the first tales of customers who'd mistaken their CD-ROM drives for cupholders began filtering along the line, somewhere a Tellus high-level exec smiled to himself in delight. When the time comes to pull the plug, humanity is going to be right where Pentex wants 'em.

Sunburst has a couple of plants overseas that manufacture CD pressers and burners, and this has proved a nicely profitable side venture. There are plenty of people in the world who'd rather pay for one piece of hardware and steal games, so Tellus is happy to make a buck off them. Plus, every now and again Sunburst-made equipment will break down after copying one too many Tellus strips of code; even so, the quality of the merchandise is such that the pirates come back for more.

Since Tellus has total control over the games that are released for the Typhoon and its other predecessor consoles (such as the Odyssey, its 32-bit system), they can make sure that nobody publishes a game they don't like for use on their hardware. Their standards seem like tight quality control to most developers, although it's really just a matter of enforcing game genres that will be highly profitable — in other words, you don't publish crap for the Typhoon that might make a gamer decide he was wasting his time playing video games. Always reward the customer for sitting in front of the TV, controller in hand; if you can't do that adequately, Tellus doesn't want your game.

Thanks to Tellus' high "prestige factor," there are still plenty of development houses who are more than willing to do what it takes to earn lucrative Tellus contracts. What's more, Tellus is rather more... accepting of third-party games' content; the suits are more than willing to slap on a "Mature" label and sell the latest workmanlike gorefest, rather than tell the programmers to tone it down for a Teen market. (After all, the teens are going to wind up buying or stealing the game anyway...) Of course, the programmers' packages often include a subtle little Bane or two, just the thing to give the development house that extra Tellus touch.

Tellus/Sunburst is also working on a system for tracking software — *all* software — that users install and sending back the information once the system is hooked up to the Internet. Theoretically, everything a computer owner does could be keyed to the unique number in the computer's network card.

Oddly enough, Riegel is less interested in developing such a system himself and more interested in some corporate espionage where this project is concerned; he's convinced that Microsoft has already perfected this process.

Finally, it's a common rumor among the Board of Directors that Tellus has the virus to end all viruses in the final stages of beta-testing. Theoretically, this virus is a blend of mundane code and prolific Bane, a super-program that can replicate itself millions of times over, adapting each new offspring to the system it infests. This nasty project, dubbed Y20K by an unknown wag, is planned to wreck the communications networks of the world within seconds of the Omega Plan's launch. Whether the program can actually live up to expectations is unknown, but Tellus has certainly got some computer wizards on their hands.

The Work Environment

Sleep is death. A masterpiece of code is immortality.

—Common wall plaque in Tellus' development studios

Let's face it: Tellus just wouldn't work in the standard office environment. After all, they deal in really great games, addictive games, games that suck people in and demand enthusiastic attention (to the exclusion of all else). You cannot get that sort of productivity out of generic wage slaves.

You have to use *customized* wage slaves.

The atmosphere in much of Tellus' office space is deliberately "relaxed" — well, whenever a deadline isn't looming, that is. And there's always a deadline looming for *somebody*. Even so, there's plenty of room for personal expression, at least down in development. Programmers are expected and encouraged to adorn their cubicles with posters, action figures, all sorts of random crap — as long as it gets their creative juices flowing. Of course, there's no room for slackers in the supercompetitive software industry; anyone who takes the "anything goes" atmosphere a little too seriously is in for a rude shock when management comes by to check in on the latest deadlines. But that's generally okay with the staff; after all, they wouldn't be in this line of work if they didn't love it. And by the time they eventually stop loving it, well, it's too late to hold out any hope for a better situation anywhere else in corporate America.

Development

Although Tellus has most of the hallmarks of the average office staff (incompetent middle management, a sales department that doesn't understand what they're selling, a marketing department that tries to redefine the products to match their ads, executives who don't understand how their products work, an incompetent network administrator, mysterious janitors that make midnight rounds of the building doing god-knows-what), the development teams are where you find most of the distinct personalities in the corporation. These are the people that make *Doctor Violence* and *C-4 Ops* the games they are — along with everything that implies.

The development department is split pretty much into two distinct groups: the fresh young hotshots, and the guys who used to be fresh young hotshots. The difference is pretty distinct, and the process of evolution is virtually heartbreaking.

Newcomers to Tellus' development teams are sometimes driven by greed and sometimes by "a vision," but both are almost always a secondary concern next to status. To the grunts down in development, status is everything. They willingly chain themselves to their desks, swilling soda and coffee and tea by the gallon, all in the name of achieving the recognition of their peers (and Riegel in particular) by jamming obscene amounts of code into the space allotted them. They're as addicted to their own games as any consumer; few of them would rather go out and have a picnic with the girlfriend than get their hands on the latest ToJ import and play every inch of it looking for hidden secrets. And hey, ramen's pretty tasty, particularly after playing Japanese games for a while. They aren't paid what they're worth, but that doesn't matter much; they're in the business because they love the industry, and because they want to achieve the dream of being wildly successful at creating the things they love best in all the world.

Naturally, this optimism doesn't last.

Those newcomers who don't burn out completely and turn to careers where they're more appreciated (like bussing tables at Applebee's) become a more jaded, bitter lot. When the realization sinks in that they aren't special, they aren't any better than any of their peers, and they don't have much of a shot of impressing their managers through virtue — well, when virtue fails, vice prevails. Tellus' hardened veterans of the programming trenches are a devious lot, gladly turning to office politics and underhanded tactics to advance their careers. Since their skills are largely useless in higher-paying sections of the business world, there's nothing else to do. Constantly plagued with problems like eye damage and carpal tunnel syndrome, often holding down second jobs to make ends meet — these desperate, grim souls are easily malleable by their superiors. With a little bit of tooth-and-nail struggling and a lot of brown-nosing, the most devious can sometimes make it to the status of lead programmer. This is a highly desirable position; after all, that way you get all the credit if your team succeeds, and can easily place the blame if your project fails. Sure, it means constant sucking up to a rotating parade of managers, but even that's better than being a peon for the rest of your days.

There's plenty of opportunity for a bitter programmer to wreak some perceived justice on his fellows. For example, a programmer might try to crack a game put out by a rival team, then release the crack covertly to the Internet. Amoral kids download the program, burn it to CD, don't buy a copy, and voila — sales are down for that product, making the other products look better by compare. Wise employees constantly change their passwords, because the clever gurus would rather watch live porn on somebody else's account, avoiding both the finance charges and the inevitable crackdown from

management. (Particularly grumpy employees like to use their manager's accounts to download kiddie porn and the like, just to watch the changeover. Regrettably, such ambitious characters often find that once in a while, they actually have a manager who's savvier than they are...). Some of these wretched individuals even dabble in credit card theft and various forms of fraud on the company's dime; after all, there's nothing worse than a former idealist who's found out there's no mercy in the system and no future in rebellion.

The only ones who manage to avoid this crush are the ones with real skill, the ones who actually manage to overcome departmental backbiting and oppressive management and become recognized. These lucky few are quickly snapped up by Riegel, who sets them to work on "higher-prestige" projects or even trades them to other subsidiaries.

Marketing

Image is everything in this business, and we mean *everything*. A sharp, dynamic edge is the difference between tons of sales throughout the chains and never getting more than a cursory mention in the glossy magazines that thrive on the business. As a result, the marketing department of Tellus holds lots of power — power that, naturally enough, has gone to their heads.

Sad though it may seem, the folks in Marketing won't just take whatever product is given them and figure out what spin to put on it so that it sells outrageous amounts of copies. Instead, their grossly swelled concept of their own importance has led to a situation in which they actually make demands of the programmers, instead of the other way around. In many cases, the lead developers of a product have to figure out a way to pitch their own project to Marketing so that it'll get the push it deserves — meaning that a team has to do the lion's share of marketing for a project so that the people in the actual marketing department will bother to print up some ads and suchlike. And if one of the Marketing boys thinks there should be some flamethrowers involved, or that the game would sell better if you were actually fighting aliens in a hollow asteroid instead of vampires in a catacomb network — well, better get back to the drawing board and rework that code.

Technically part of neither Marketing nor Development, but often classified with "those Marketing bastards," is Tellus' decent-sized pool of artists. These people are generally loaned out to programming teams to help design a game's visuals, given the job of illustrating manuals and game covers, and set to work creating illos for ads and Tellus' in-house magazines. About half of these artists could be charitably called "creatively diseased"; the concept sketches they create would get them institutionalized if they worked anywhere else. They are alternately loathed and respected for their "vision," depending on who you ask — but the art pool is generally loathed for other reasons. Like many other artists, they have "artistic temperament"; among other things, this means a nasty tendency toward creating cover art that looks

nothing like the game in question. Worst of all (to the programmers' minds), they often elaborate on games in their illustrations, adding in new concepts of their own that the managers just love. All of a sudden, the programmers are stuck adding in new weapons, monsters, character templates and level designs, just because a manager took a ghoulish fancy to an artist's fevered sketch. The level of taint among the art pool ranges from "none discernible" for the more workmanlike admen to "reeking" for the most demented freaks who work out their sadomasochistic fantasies on paper — when they aren't working them out on "models."

The current head of Tellus' marketing department is Raul Galen, a bloated whale of a man with nasty misogynistic tendencies and the expected amount of arrogance. He's completely unaware of the existence of any supernatural entities whatsoever; he was picked for his job on the qualifications of his business acumen and monomaniac personality alone.

Customer Service

Customer Service is, pure and simple, a punishment. Well, that's not what it says on the inter-office memos, and that's not what they tell the customers or even the employees, but it's common scuttlebutt around the office that the luckless people stuck answering phones for Tellus are people who somehow pissed off management in some way. After all, how much can you really respect someone if you give them the job of answering phones all day, trying to tell people how to work a CD-ROM drive?

Even so, managers are careful to make sure that the Customer Service reps don't actually find out how low they are on the totem pole; after all, part of enforcing a user-friendly image and reinforcing the customer's dependence on Tellus' largesse involves having a functional customer service department. Employees who snap and start giving wildly inaccurate solutions to customers' problems are quickly identified, removed (without references) and replaced with somebody else who unwittingly pissed off someone important. Those who remain are stuck answering mind-numbingly idiotic questions until they're set off as well; Tellus' unspoken policy of less-than-helpful documentation makes it no easier on them. But all the misery that Customer Service endures is another step forward for Pentex's plan of breaking the will of the masses.

Small consolation, eh?

Quality Assurance

The QA division is almost as much of a punishment as Customer Service, although it wouldn't seem so to the outsider. Essentially, a Quality Assurance employee is paid to playtest the living hell out of a game, eight hours a day for weeks on end, discovering bugs and testing difficulty levels before finally submitting a report on the game.

To the ordinary fan, this seems like a dream job. The job requirements are even appropriately unorthodox; testers are expected to know secret moves and hidden levels from games of all publishers and genres. If you



know all of Ryu's attacks from *Street Fighter*, and you how to get the Charnel Heart in *Lords of the Crypt*'s hidden crematorium level, you might be the kind of tester Tellus is looking for. Sounds too good to be true — which of course, it is.

For one, QA employees don't get to select the product they work on; it's assigned. Even you're the world's biggest *Doctor Violence* fan — even if you designed a fan webpage for it — there's no guarantee you'll get to playtest the sequel. You might get stuck with Mr. *Bananner's Typing for Tots* instead — eight hours a day for four weeks, with complete reports due at the end. For another, QA is one of the few divisions lower on the totem pole than the rightly frustrated (and borderline sadistic) Development staff. As a result, Development frequently tries to make end-runs around QA, falsifying approval forms and the like, and that's when they're feeling nice.

Longtime employees all know the story of the proposed accessory, the Impact Vest. On paper, the Impact Vest was a simple peripheral that used a vibratory feature to let the player know when he'd been "hit," making shooting games and the like much more dynamic. Of course, this almost certainly wouldn't have been a great seller (unconventional peripherals rarely are), but that didn't stop Development from designing a few samples and Management from approving a testing cycle. It would've been bad enough for the QA people to be strapped into vests a couple of sizes too small for weeks on end, but through negligence or deliberate nastiness, the wiring was faulty on the vest. One out of every twenty or so "impacts" resulted in actual electric shock, making life hell on earth for those QA inmates who didn't dare quit. The project was finally scrapped after the full run of testing, and this wasn't even really a source of relief for QA — any satisfaction they might have gotten from believing that they'd actually made a difference was quickly drowned in the followup rumors that the whole thing was just an extended prank on QA in the first place.

The one saving grace is that occasionally, just maybe, QA serves as a quick entry point into Development. At least twice in the last three years, a manager looking for a burnout's replacement has snapped up one of the testers of said burnout's project. After all, it does make sense to replace a missing programmer or writer with someone who already knows the game inside and out. Of course, the downside to a promotion to Development is, well... then you have to work in Development.

For all its pathos, the Quality Assurance division is one of Tellus' weak points: Its low standards for entry make it a very viable option for monkeywrenchers. It would be fairly simple for any Ragabash to slip into Tellus through the QA catdoor, and get to work from there. However, exposing oneself to potentially tainted programs for long hours each day is a grave risk, one that makes any such operation more dangerous than it seems.

Management

Tellus management, with few exceptions, is just as oppressively out-of-touch as management in any other field; in some cases, even more so. The managers are big fans of multi-step programs, catchy mottoes that "promote effectiveness," and even, Heaven forbid, seminars. Their duty is twofold: one, they have to keep the programmers firmly in line; two, they must constantly keep morale at a nice, high level. Needless to say, it's impossible to do both at once.

As a result, management tends to focus on the first part and make a show of working toward the second. It doesn't help that managers are generally pretty resentful of the design staff. If you give them any slack, programmers will start grumbling catchy little slogans like "a product is only late until it's released, but it'll be lame forever" — and that is not the attitude that helps a healthy release schedule. Although they're not allowed to personally persecute individual programmers, most managers get a "pointy-haired boss" attitude fairly early, and start making their underlings' lives miserable in little, subtle ways.

The motto of management could almost be summed up in one sentence: If something's not working right, it's Development's fault. As a corollary, if Development is screwing up, more discipline is in order; yes, that means working longer days, coming in on weekends, the whole nine yards. Tellus' managers are all too typical of their species in that regard.

An additional frustrating factor is that for some odd reason, management tends to be rather inept when it comes to actually knowing things about computers and how to work them. A lead programmer often doesn't know as much as the young hotshots he's got under him; and his manager doesn't know all that much about computers himself, and on up the ranks until you reach branch managers who can't type with more than two fingers.

The exception to this increasing scale of computer illiteracy is, of course, Abraham "Doc" Riegel, Tellus' CEO, and his elite. But then again, Riegel's an exception in all sorts of ways.

• Other

There are, of course, plenty of other departments in Tellus. However, given that Tellus isn't packed to the gills with devil-worshippers or supernatural entities, it shouldn't be a surprise that the staff of, say, Accounting is basically as mundane as it gets. The paranormal elements that have infected Tellus have essentially settled in upper management and product design, where the action is. If you feel like throwing in a Bone Gnawer mole here or the wraith of an overworked administrative assistant there, feel free. Otherwise, it's safe to assume that the normal people who are allegedly the majority in the World of Darkness have a department or three all to themselves. Trust us, your players won't kill you for the subtleties.

Personnel

As tightly knit as the upper levels of Tellus management are, it shouldn't be too surprising that there are relatively few out-and-out, in-the-know Wyrms-worshippers amongst the higher ranks. Even those who are somewhat aware of Pentex's Omega Plan tend to know little or nothing about the actual supernatural evil that serves as patron to the megacorp.

Upper-level management is basically split into two groups — the “pros,” those who were mandated by the Board or brought on for simple reasons, and the “elite,” who were personally headhunted by Riegel. Pros are generally slick suits with plenty of corporate greed and ruthlessness, but little to no computer savvy. A few of these have been initiated into the Wyrms' arts, and a couple are thralls to Lord Thurifuge, who veils his true nature to them while delivering cryptic messages about the spread of desensitization and detachment from reality. The elite, on the other hand, are more likely to be “in the know”; those who aren't are the sorts of people who do what's asked of them simply because it's a challenge. The elite are also more likely to be distracted with their own agendas, so it's even money which group causes the most trouble for the world in general.

Abraham “Doc” Riegel

“Doc” Riegel is something of a legend in the computer gaming industry. His name has appeared in countless games as an in-joke, usually as the archmage credited with some spell of destruction (such as Riegel's Annihilation from *Legends of Death*) or as the proprietor of some infamous tavern (like “Doc Riegel's” in *Blast Crater* or “The Regal Arms” in *Fairlandia Online*). He was one of the pioneers of computer gaming, the electronic wizard with a keen eye for selling digital escapism. Countless game programmers admire him as one of the grandfathers of their industry, and would do just about anything for the chance to work for him. Regrettably, the good Doc is quite aware of his reputation. Behind the facade of the late-30s, always-casual man lies one of the most Brobdignagian egos in a business already renowned for overly swelled heads.

Even so, it's not as if Riegel's egotism is entirely baseless. There's no denying that the Doc has an edge. The few remaining old-timers on the Tellus payroll say that he's always had something of a “magic touch” as far as electronics are concerned; he could literally make them sit up and do tricks if he felt like bolting on a couple of servo limbs. Not one of his associates, however, would guess that Riegel's edge is spiritual. But that's his trick — he manages to keep up with the constantly shifting language of technology by communicating with the very spirits of the machines.

This edge isn't all that surprising, really, when you know the whole story: Riegel's dark secret is that he's a

Sprite Chewer

Level 5, Gnosis 8

Riegel is in possession of a one-of-a-kind fetish, a spirit “reprogrammer” he devised not long after his defection. The fetish isn't particularly portable; it takes the form of a home computer system with a generous monitor. (Currently, the fetish is in the form of an iMac; Riegel is a sufficiently accomplished Theurge that he has managed to transfer the spirits within from housing to housing as technological advances permit.) However, it has the power to capture, bind, and reconfigure spirits — all from the convenience of your desk.

The Sprite Chewer, once activated, allows the user to perform a variant Rite of Summoning without crossing the Gauntlet; however, only spirits connected to electricity and/or the Weaver's Web can be called. The user can also perform a variant Rite of Binding on any spirit thus summoned; the fetish adds two to the user's Willpower for purposes of binding the spirit. Finally, by spending a final Gnosis point, the user can invoke the Theurge Gift: The Malleable Spirit on a spirit thusly summoned and bound.

Theoretically, a Theurge with access to Riegel's notes or some other grounding in the Sprite Chewer's workings could craft another of these fetishes. To do so, it would involve binding a Weaver-spirit and a Wyld-spirit into the same housing — an all but impossible feat.

fallen Glass Walker Theurge. His true name was Adrian “Soldering Claw” McKibben, and he was one of the true up-and-comers of his sept. However, young Adrian was never really into the altruistic part of serving the planet. After being caught at using his electronic prowess to pad his own bank accounts just a little too much, he fled his sept and eventually faked his own death. With the help of his “nest egg” in an overseas account, he quickly worked up some capital, and began building a new fortune for himself. In a properly Theurgish burst of insight, the teenager decided that the newly forming video game industry was the place to go. The rest is history.

Unsurprisingly, the few Black Spiral Dancers who are aware of Riegel's achievements, true nature (particularly his carefully concealed taste for human flesh) and talents are dying to recruit him. Francesco himself has even covertly met with Riegel, encouraging the former Glass Walker to come and dance the Spiral in order to get the backing of an entire tribe. However, the Doc has always politely shrugged off these invitations, pleading that he'll be along for his initiation “as soon as the deadlines let up for a little while.” With Tellus' breakneck pace and the ever-escalating advances in technology, though, the deadlines have so far been consistently unforgiving....

James Tsai

A rather unassuming, quiet young man, James Tsai is nonetheless one of the more powerful figures at Tellus. His working title is "director of overseas resources"; however, as one of the "elite," he tends to rely a little less on formality and a little more on cunning. Tsai is the one in charge of Tellus' overseas plants, which are mainly located in India and China. There the labor's cheap and often well-educated; quite the ideal. These plants are where Tellus produces many of its replicated CDs (and DVDs, in the case of the Typhoon). Although many of the companies here aren't honest, Tsai is the proverbial thief set to catch a thief. Formerly an electronics whiz who used his talents for remarkably effective crime sprees, now Tsai uses what he knows to prevent Tellus from being ripped off too badly.

What makes Tsai even more of a danger are his connections. Given that the occasional software sent overseas has been cracked, replicated, and sold off at a bargain price, most publishers just cross their fingers and pray it doesn't happen to their latest project. James, however, sometimes sets up a bit of source code with the intention of having it be cracked and sold to a pirate publisher. Such source code is always carefully marked via electronic Bane, and soon Tellus moves in on the offender, bringing those illegal channels under their control. In such a fashion, Tellus has acquired no less than four pirate organizations, and Tsai has gained quite a bit of leverage in two Asian organized crime syndicates.

For his part, James seems to be quite, quite mundane. However, he's definitely "in the know" when it comes to thing like electronic spirits and supernatural entities. Although few could say for sure, presumably he's some sort of mortal sorcerer, possibly with a few granted Investments as the icing on the cake (see *Book of the Wyrms Second Edition*, pg. 141). He has shared the occasional dinner of human flesh with his werewolf boss, although it's even odds whose idea it was.

Hamura Ujimitsu

More feudal shogun than CEO, Hamura Ujimitsu is the power in control of Tellus of Japan. He's a hard-nosed, iron-willed man with both the vision and the drive to see it accomplished. It's popular knowledge that Hamura-sama, as he's referred to reverently by underlings and know-it-all fans alike, used to work for a rival software developer until his pride endangered his standing with his boss. Rather than kowtow and apologize, Mr. Hamura moved to his back-up plan, which involved Tellus' recent takeover of Tetsumomo. He arrived at the temporary offices while the reorganization was still taking place, forcefully sold himself to all present, and was quickly hired.

Now Hamura-sama is renowned for his commitment to sparing no expense to provide the ultimate immersion in the dark worlds of ToJ's games. His face appears in glossy magazines whenever he deigns to grant them an interview, and pity the poor newbie to rec.games.video.tellus who

doesn't recognize his name. Whenever he acts as an executive producer to a project, the industry sits up and takes note — if Hamura-sama is willing to put his name on it, it must be good.

Hamura is tall for an Asian man, standing at least half a head above his coworkers. His strong, almost aquiline features make him look like the *daimyo* that the industry has called him. What's more, he's one of the few Tellus high-ups with actual supernatural ability — in fact, there's probably nobody quite like him in the world. You see, Hamura is Tengu Kin, although he was always quite ruthless even by a shapechanger's standards. He was seduced by the Wyrms in the course of his espionage for the clan, and quietly murdered his Tengu wife shortly after his fall. But perhaps even more appalling was his treatment of their infant son: Using a strange ritual somehow gleaned from the depths of Yomi, Hamura took the spirit egg bound to his child and devoured it, gaining a portion of the power of a Tengu. As a result, Hamura is faster and more durable than an ordinary human, and has been granted a few Wyrms-Gifts as well. More importantly, he has exceptionally keen senses and a knack for foretelling the future; it's this gift that led him to his current position and has enabled him to evade the vengeance of his Tengu relatives thus far. The *hengeyokai* of Japan have placed Hamura close to the top of their "must kill" list, but so far, they haven't been able to find the blind spot in his prophetic sight.

Development Houses

As the software publisher most willing to take risks on products aimed at "mature" audiences, Tellus naturally draws the more extreme software studios' attention. A few of these houses have signed, or are close to signing, exclusivity deals with Tellus (not unlike Squaresoft's current policy of developing only for Sony). These studios aren't based right next to Tellus headquarters; in fact, they could have set up shop almost anywhere, making them a unique way of placing a concentration of Tellus' brand of corruption conveniently near your players' homestead.

• Nightmare Engine

Firmly and contentedly in Tellus' pocket, Nightmare Engine Studios is an "independent" house almost in name only. Riegel discovered this disgruntled band of malcontents huddled in a tiny storefront in Arsenecke, Iowa, where they split their time between crunching code and making prank phone calls to the local AM talk shows. They still play nasty practical jokes on their hapless neighbors, but at least now they're doing so in a rather nicer business park — even if the jokes have gotten more malevolent. Even so, the company's done all right with the projects it's created for Tellus. Their most recent offering was *Lycanthrope: The Rapture — The Bowels of Terra*, which proved to be a remarkably popular first-person shooter (well, "mauler") based on the premise of

werewolves defending their twisting underground tunnels against other werewolf invaders. Needless to say, any Glass Walkers who actually picks up a copy will probably not be amused.

Team Motto: *If the publisher asks for more blood, who are we to argue?*

- **Fatalistic**

One of the more elite freelance development houses, Fatalistic has a well-deserved reputation for perfectionism. Ultra-slick and mega-arrogant, the boys at Fatalistic aren't ever content to use game engines that other people have designed; in fact, they're typically resentful of having to use so much as hardware or word processing programs that they didn't design themselves. They're a brutally mercenary (and accordingly successful) bunch, super status-conscious and quite touchy. Their relationship with Tellus thrives basically because they perceive Tellus as being on the edge of extreme content, which works nicely with their goals of being the biggest, fastest and best. It's been a pretty fruitful relationship so far. Their latest offering, *Revenant: The Ravishing — Damnation* blended online gaming and simple console roleplaying into the well-told (and well-received) story of an undead marauder's gradual deterioration and damnation over centuries of slaughter and debauchery. Yeah, so it was based on a tainted Black Dog product, programmed on tainted Sunburst hardware, probably even by tainted programmers — a small price to pay, especially unwittingly, for the status they got out of it.

Team Motto: *Who programmed this crap? Give us a month or two and we'll make something better.*

- **Wotan Studios**

A Japanese studio who publishes for ToJ, Wotan is almost completely under the iron hand of Hamura-sama. The programmers of Wotan pride themselves on their versatility; it's a matter of honor for them to be able to put out immersive RPGs, fighting games with impeccable physics and twitchy shooters with equal ability. Wotan doesn't do license work; all of their properties, including the ever-popular *Shadow Lancer* RPG series, are originals. The studio is of particular interest because one of its more notable character designers is Katsu Yoshihara, an artist of exceptional popularity among Japanese fans — and an Eastern vampire, no less. Katsu's artbooks (of which there are currently three available in Japan) drip with sadomasochistic imagery, all impeccably rendered in a variety of media. This is hardly surprising, given the strength of the Kuei-jin's P'o (in other words, his demon side). More notable is the fact that Katsu is a student of supernatural politics, and has included images of selected Western vampires, spirits and other supernaturals in his art. It's entirely possible that a Garou or vampire might recognize an important figure, aptly caricatured, in such an artbook or video game. So far, none have — the vampires of the West are more interested in their struggles for power than

in keeping up with Japanese fads — but Katsu is on the borderline of breaking the Veil with his designs. Given that he's happy to express his sadistic tendencies in ways other than his artwork, his indiscretion is probably the least of his crimes.

Team Motto: *We design worlds; if the buyer does not forget where he is, we have failed.*

Security Precautions

As with most of Pentex's lesser subsidiaries, Tellus doesn't offer much by way of hard targets; most of its employees are fleshy punching bags as far as Garou are concerned. Recently, however, they've gotten an extra boost by way of security. As a gesture of goodwill to Riegel, Francesco has loaned out several of his Hivemates on a more-or-less fixed basis to act as security for the Tellus main offices. These Dancers aren't thrilled with the low prestige (as Black Spiral affairs go, of course) of this assignment, and usually lounge around bored as all get-out ('cause the personnel sure isn't worth talking to, and is mostly off-limits as far as "play" is concerned). Their only release is, of course, testing out most of the beta versions of Tellus' bloodier offerings, and hoping that some monkeywrenching Gaian do-gooders will someday try to make trouble.

Apart from that, the security is pretty basic. Human security guards are stationed only in buildings where actual hardware research takes place (excepting corporate headquarters, of course); the rest of the offices make do with motion detectors, alarm systems and other vanilla fare.

Tellus' physical security measures pale in comparison to their Umbral security, though. To do any real damage to Tellus' business, that means dealing with their computer system — which is a seven-layer-cake of pure electronic nightmare. Riegel knew *exactly* what he was doing when he set up Tellus' main system, and what he was doing was loading an already top-notch computer system with corrupted Weaver-spirits by the barrelfull. Only the must Umbrally adept Garou stand much of a chance of even getting close to the electronic hive that is Tellus' mainframe in the Penumbra without being calcified, slain or worse. Banes aplenty infest the area, from corrupted electricity elementals to the customized Chompers (see below). Riegel's fully aware that there are hacker mages out there, too, and has woven some nasty little "countermagic" subroutines into the system that can pop out and surprise a so-called computer adept at a really inconvenient moment. The Umbral security is so extensive that it has also seeped into the simple electronic security systems of the main offices; around here, the motion sensors have attitude!

Simple mundane hacking isn't a good way in, either. (But what do you expect? They're Pentex's computer aces!) Tellus has set up a "dummy server" complete with mock files of importance and super-encryption, but anyone who hacks

into this red herring winds up getting a load of false information and an Umbral tag from one of the micro-Banes infesting the system. Every last hacker who's tried screwing with Tellus over the phone lines has been marked, analyzed and then "contacted." One or two have gotten job offers after such a stunt. The rest... well....

Of course, theoretically, if one *could* gain control of Tellus' main system — and keep it — that could be it for the company. The monkeywrencher clever enough to get that far could probably figure out some way to set Tellus' self-destruction in motion. But if the electronic genius that good has been born yet, nobody knows about it.

Chompers

It saw him coming just as he was crossing into the glowing junction, and the sight of it stopped him right there, one foot on a dry strand of Web and one on the path. It was like some sort of knight-in-tarnished-armor, complete with elaborate curling horns spiraling from its major joints and red eyes that glowed, emberlike, from the darkened visor. But it wasn't right — it was too angular and unreal. And Bion recognized it.

"You have got to be kidding," he breathed, shaking his head. "A Reaver Knight? A freakin' Lejjendary Kwest Reaver Knight? No freakin' —"

He might have laughed, but his next breath was blasted from him as lightning leapt from the spirit's semi-geometrical sword, slamming into him with a flash and roar. His world went white and overwhelmingly loud, and his legs kicked out involuntarily, hurling him from the Web. Bion struggled for his pistol even as his hearing and sight were trying to refocus. The ringing died, replaced with the metallic, echoing roar of the knight — a roar overlaid on a wet, insane chittering. Bion tensed himself, tightening his muscles against the strike that was sure to follow....

The freakish Chompers are one of the many threats to be found in Tellus' Penumbra security grid, although they're certainly the most distinct. The first few were almost certainly "reprogrammed" by Riegel and his Sprite Chewer fetish; however, they now haunt Tellus' Penumbra mainframes in such numbers that it's inconceivable that Riegel would have had time to create them all. Somehow, impossibly, they must have found a way to reproduce.

Chompers are essentially video villains, although not nearly as cartoony as a Pac-Man ghost or the like. No, these spirits resemble polygonal monsters of a more serious bent, whether the bloodthirsty werewolf Eric Montresor from *Brawl Devil* or the many-jawed Sluice Gorgons from *Lords of the Crypt* — the sorts of games that provide appropriate Chomper shells are the sorts of games that never, ever get licensed into Saturday morning cartoons. Considering that some Tellus programmers even get their inspiration from Bane-sent nightmares, it's entirely possible to run into a Chomper that looks like a Furmling or Nexus Crawler or other Bane — only with a mapped-on texture at a very high pixel count.

Although Chompers are quite deadly, and often work in pairs or small packs, they aren't the brightest of spirits. Most have an intelligence much like what you'd expect from a game's AI or a low-ranking Weaver-spirit; they tend to patrol in set patterns, and can be avoided if their backs are turned (assuming they have "backs"). However, their learning curves are constantly improving. They're keeping up with technology.

Rage 9, Gnosis 6, Willpower 5, Power 60

Charms: Armor, Control Electrical Systems, Incite Frenzy, Lightning Bolts, Materialize (rare), Short Out

Using Tellus

Of course, by now you may figure that Tellus is a natural foil to any Glass Walker in your pack. The CEO is a stain on the tribe's name (although one who's hidden himself well), their methodology is a blight on the entire electronics industry, and they provide the heart of Pentex's computer systems and security. Any Glass Walker worth the name has to try toppling this silicon empire of greed and decadence; what's more, the werewolf capable of such a feat would reap a Renown reward so great it might just guarantee inclusion in the Silver Record itself.

However, don't overlook one very important fact — the Garou Nation *does not know* that Tellus is any different from any other money-grubbing, marketing-obsessed, "games for players who just want to kill things" pixel-peddler on the market. Tellus is hesitant to use Banes when good old-fashioned marketing strategy and subliminals work just as well, so the ever-popular Sense Wyrms is no sure way of picking a Tellus game out of the electronic herd.

Riegel is obviously one of Tellus' weak points; the company was built as much on his reputation as anything, and he's competent not only at management, but at the plethora of cutting-edge electronic skills that makes Tellus so dangerous. If he were removed, the Board of Directors would be hard-pressed to find someone to fill his shoes. Only a Black Spiral Dancer Theurge would be able to duplicate some of his special skills, and, well, they're all mad. Of course, Pentex realizes this particular Achilles' heel, and so Riegel is one of the best-protected executives in the Western world (excepting the Board of Directors, of course).

Secondly, although it would be nightmarishly difficult to wreck Tellus' Umbral computer network, that would be a blow from which the company would be unlikely to recover. Their network houses not only much of the company's files, but is also the main means of implementing Banes in their work. Tellus doesn't have enough active technoshamans or shapeshifters in their ranks to meet the demands for viral Banes and other products, so crashing the network would cut out their ability to place supernatural taint in products.

And although it seems that only Glass Walkers, Bone Gnawers and other Urrah are likely to run across Tellus in operation, don't forget about little aspects like Kinfolk. Of all the tribes, only the Red Talons don't have to worry about a relative bringing home a Sunburst PC or hanging out at an arcade with one too many Tellus machines. The Internet is a good way for anyone to be accidentally exposed to a Bane-virus seeking a home, and the malign spirits might even get into cell phones or the like. Umbral travelers might detect strange new kinds of Banes surfing the Web, Banes that seem kind of... familiar. A few tainted

Tellus or Sunburst products would be a great way to hyperaccentuate an already conservative Garou's technoshock into levels of nigh-paranoia. Fun, eh?

Finally, don't forget that Tellus is brimming with possibilities for visuals and backdrops; a fight in a hardware manufacturing plant, an arcade after hours, or across the blighted neon landscape of a development house's Penumbral reflection are all good ways to get your pack champing at the bit. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination; after all, the mind's eye is better than any graphics card ever.







Crudler, Arizona — Police were aghast Monday night when they received a call from the neighbors of Edward and Eunice Landers shortly after eleven p.m. The couple's 16-year-old grandson Marcus Maspeth, according to the hysterical phone call, was cavorting across the Landerses' front lawn, naked, smeared with blood and screaming at the top of his lungs.

Police arrived shortly thereafter, taking Maspeth into custody and investigating the grisly scene. The Landerses had been brutally bludgeoned with a variety of household tools, which had been left around the living room and kitchen where their bodies were found. After compiling a report, police questioned Maspeth, who claimed to have killed his grandparents "to conduct the ritual that would have made me a child of Azazel, a living vampire."

Added Maspeth, "Call me Beltaine Belial."

The murders have shocked the tiny community, prompting local parents to speculate wildly as to the cause of the brutal affair. Several of the more outspoken residents of Crudler marched on the town's single police station mere minutes after the arrest was made. Amid chants of "Free Marcus Maspeth! The death penalty for Marcus Maspeth!" the town soon found itself in the throes of public outrage.

Rufus Grange, who lives on the same street as the Landerses, commented, "Marcus was always a troubled boy, but very nice and quiet. He is surely very much to blame, if he is at all to blame. But I do know one thing — knee-jerk reaction is necessary to bring this thing to its proper end. Do you have the phone number for 60 Minutes?"

A relative of Maspeth's (records are unclear as to whether she is his aunt or sister), Amber Krustheim, spoke vehemently about the matter. "Marcus is not responsible for his actions. The fact that

his grandparents were oblivious and senile and let him run around on undisciplined rampages had nothing to do with this. It is irrelevant that his mother is a crank junkie who sleeps with freight drivers in tractor-trailers at truck stops for money to buy meth and left him with his grandparents eight years ago. We have no idea who Marcus' father is, but that is not important. What is important is that Marcus played video games and the role-playing games and listened to The Marilyn Mansons. That is obviously the problem, and we will be suing everyone involved with this tragedy for grossly inflated reparation fees. In fact, I would like to sue you for talking about this event and causing me emotional stress. You will hear from my daytime-TV lawyer concerning punitive damages. I am very scared. And probably saddened."

A call to nearby role-playing game publisher Black Dog Game Factory of Atlanta, Georgia resulted in a press release from Marketing Coordinator Duncan MacGregor, which stated, "For fuck's sake, can't you people control your goddamned broods of vermin-children? Hello? We're publishers, not babysitters. Maybe if you actually spent some time with your kids instead of parking them in front of televisions or turning them loose in your suburban rot-pits, they wouldn't bash your heads in with belt sanders and drink your lousy, inbred blood."

When reached for comment, several freelancers for this secret role-playing industry gibbered incoherently, raging about some sort of "witch-hunt" and making rash, ill-conceived references to the First Amendment.

Asked about her feelings for the Landerses, Krustheim remarked, "Who? Oh, them. They're dead, so whatever. Who made your photographer's camera? Can I sue them?"

Extremely Important Warning

Sad to say, there are people out there who don't have a sense of humor about their hobbies. These folks cannot stand being ribbed, and are seemingly incapable of noticing the myriad peculiarities of their pastimes — and consider any attempt at parodying those peculiarities to be a mortal insult.

If you are one of these people, the sort of person who takes convention-going completely seriously and considers any possible hint that there might be a marginally dysfunctional person or two in the roleplaying hobby or industry an act of slander —

Read No Further.

The rest of you, have a look at what roleplaying's like in the World of Darkness. And just be glad it's not as bad in real life, right?

The Dregs of Publishing

At once critically acclaimed and reviled, simultaneously loved and loathed, equally welcomed and shunned, the games, staff and philosophies of the notorious Black Dog Game Factory have made an indelible mark on one of Pentex's smallest yet most fecund interests. Resigned apparently forever to the niche market of roleplaying games (which it makes pretentious claims of "revolutionizing"), the Wyrms-thralls of Black Dog have shaken their hobby industry to its very foundations. Indeed, the gaming industry seems to be a microcosmic representation of the Tellurian — at least to some extent.

The gaming niche, known as "the Industry" to people who wish to give it more gravity than it deserves, exists in a tenuous state of near-Apocalypse itself. Struggles play out daily over prime distribution, new properties, marketing and ever-important visibility, mirroring the Garou's conflicts against the depredations of the Wyrms. Like the fallen werewolf tribes of the past, gaming companies have made noble sacrifices (or foolish blunders, depending upon whom you ask) and become legend. In the end, however, almost as much lies at stake in the war for gaming as it does in the battle to prevent Apocalypse. Souls are on the line, and the weapons Black Dog Game Factory uses are equally as reprehensible as those employed on other fronts of the war.

At the bottom line, Black Dog is a company that handles pop-culture entertainment. As such, it employs the easiest, most effective tactic in the realm of escapism: desensitization. By creating games that espouse nihilism, wanton violence and senseless, affected radicalism, Black Dog subverts the will of its audience, encouraging its enthusiasts to lose themselves in epic tales told around the table rather than getting involved in affairs that would have a larger impact on the world.

Black Dog games exist to generate one of three responses: apathy, sympathy or mania. The company struc-

tures its titles to strike a chord in the customer, and from there Black Dog Game Factory steers its game enthusiasts down a road of inevitable destruction. Indeed, becoming involved at all with Black Dog games dooms a player — the only question is how long it takes to reach that point.

The Masses

Black Dog Games' largest demographic belongs to what the company management calls "the masses." By and large, the masses are common, everyday game enthusiasts, primarily involved at the high-school and college levels, who get involved with Black Dog games as a hobby. The passion takes root and, before the gamer knows it, he's become hooked.

This "first-stage addiction" serves to ensure not only the long-term success of Black Dog games on the market, but also allows the nefarious content of the games to rot the gamer's mind from within. Although the player may have initially been drawn to the game by the hipness of the setting or the epic possibilities of playing an antihero, he soon becomes mired in the ever-increasing tide of violence and deviance in which the games lead players to indulge. Soon, the player becomes completely desensitized to atrocity — what does it matter to him that four thousand dollars worth of crack was seized at his high school? Who cares that another cheerleader aborted an infant and left the fetus in the dumpster behind the cafeteria? Such trivialities have no place among the nightly torments of Klotar, Ravager of Maidens! Why can these petty mortals not see his pain?

The masses become so involved in the exploits of their characters that not only do they cease to be able to discern fantasy from reality, they are led not to care. By eroding the moral backbone of Black Dog game players, the Game Factory removes one more support from the community's infrastructure.

The masses is a bit of a misnomer, in fact. Black Dog positions itself as an entertainment alternative for "intelligent and creative individuals," hoping to create a feeling of superiority in the people who take interest in the subject matter. Assuring itself an unhealthy mix of pretentious poseurs and social retards who have "outgrown" the desire to portray hobbits and half-elf princesses, the masses are common only by the law of averages. For every budding genius mathematician who joins Black Dog's Legion of Darkness fan club, the company also recruits a wretched, greasy geek who would have never amounted to anything. Thus, the masses are a proving ground as much as anything else — the Black Dog staff carefully reviews submissions sent by these lost souls pining to express their boundless angst, and culls the promising members for future freelance employment. The rest it leaves to continue buying books and drowning in the sea of product releases.

The Power Trippers

Too young or emotionally underdeveloped to belong to the masses, the power trippers become involved in Black Dog games for the sheer thrill of vicarious violence. A notable few power trippers also enjoy some degree of Black

Dog Games' counterculture aspects, but only in the sense that it lets them feel cool that their characters are wearing black trenchcoats while blowing things up.

Black Dog Game Factory is not proud, however, and for all its ballyhooing over "mature roleplaying" and "Talespinning first and foremost!" it subtly caters to the stunted socialization of those who become power trippers. Granted, the deep setting of the games serves to draw in the crowd that becomes the masses' rank and file, but at the center of every book lies a chapter on insanely powerful supernatural abilities with which players may arm their characters. From the Revenants' Blights to the Lycanthropes' Karma to the Warlocks' Sexe Magicque, every character in Black Dog games possesses a vast degree of potential far beyond that of common mortals.

It is precisely this collection of potent abilities that draws power trippers to the games — it's uncool to be a mortal. Why not become one of the unholy undead? Or how about a reality-warping Pixie? Better yet, why not purchase all the games and the Tome of Unification and create your own unique hybrid?

Obviously, the entire concept of roleplaying goes way over the heads of the power trippers. They don't even bother to make characters — they simply assemble lists of powers and have at each other.

Despite the fact that the majority of the games' content misses them entirely, Black Dog nonetheless ekes some degree of utility out of the power trippers. These are the kids who kill their parents, torture animals and gun down por-

tions of their elementary-school classes. By nudging these maladjusted sociopaths *just a bit* over the line, Black Dog can serve as the catalyst for suburban violence and the inevitable apathy that follows the 13th babysitter poisoning this month. By overstimulating these emotional dullards, Black Dog games ensure that the players become so jaded that real-life atrocities are the only actions left that can elicit any response. And in the end, Black Dog always manages to slink away, scot-free. After all, when another Korn shirt-clad piece of white trash is led away in the state's custody, who's going to blame an innocent book? It's only a game....

The Goblins

Black Dog Game Factory also harbors a secret known only to a few high-ranking members of the studio and its Pentex parent. When each book goes to press, the printer mixes a chemical in with the ink and seals a foul ichor into the books' bindings. At an additional cost of less than a penny a book, these chemicals serve to create a legion of slavishly loyal quasi-fomori, which those in the know label as goblins.

When they purchase Black Dog books, goblins-to-be unknowingly expose themselves to the tainted substances, which weaken their spirits to such a degree that a Bane sometimes takes them over. Already maladjusted by roleplaying games, macabre fantasies and ostracism, the nascent goblin practically welcomes the Bane, which may whisper entreaties of power in his ear or may just possess the gamer by force.

DEVELOPER: THE DEGRADATION

BY ANDRÉ GATES



Goblin Fomori Powers

The powers that manifest in the goblin fomori are relatively minor, but then, they're not supposed to be spectacular foes. Although these unpleasant edges aren't necessarily unnoticeable, they certainly aren't overwhelming. Goblins won't be going toe-to-toe with werewolves, but they'll have a definite edge over normal folks they encounter.

- **Creeping Crud** — The goblin's skin has acquired an excrescence, which flakes off and agitates those around him as it burns their skin, nostrils and lungs. If anyone in the fomor's immediate vicinity wishes to take extended physical action — combat, exercise, certain demanding rites — she must make a Willpower roll (difficulty 6) after a number of turns equal to her Stamina or become distracted by the flaky malady's cloying irritation. This distraction carries any penalties the Storyteller sees fit: It may confound a ritual or assess a difficulty penalty to any rolls made in the goblin's presence.

- **Execrable Ooze** — The greasy skin and matted hair of the goblin exude an odious substance that clings like oil to his enemies, making objects slip through their grasp. Those individuals who touch the fomor must succeed in a Dexterity roll (difficulty 6) to use tools (including weapons) for the remainder of the scene in which they came in contact with the fomor.

- **Graceless Oblivion** — Withdrawn from polite society amid his stacks of mangled character sheets and tattered copies of *The Warlock's Guide to Paradigm Infliction* (Level Four), the goblin has instilled in himself a supernal disregard for the social contract of his culture. Normally, this allows him to wear silly costumes that make him look preposterous or to don "Tolkien Rules!" T-shirts four sizes too small without being crushed by the

derision of the humans surrounding him. It also applies, however, to other social situations. If the goblin spends a Willpower point, he may ignore the detrimental effects of any Social roll or power, such as Garou Gifts, other fomori powers, or even — should the unthinkable happen — attempts at seduction, etc.

- **Insidious Diet** — The combination of the books' Fomori and the gamer's steady diet of Funyuns, Jolt Cola, Little Debbie Chocolate Rolls and Surge have created a high level of toxicity tolerance in the goblin. He is unaffected by poisons, blood agents, vampiric blood, gasses, etc. as long as they are ingested orally. They are simply digested and eliminated by his system.

- **Master of Fate** — By exerting his will over the polyhedral dice used in gaming, the goblin can assure himself of obtaining a certain roll. Although this is less than useful among normal people who have no use for funny-shaped dice, the fomor has learned to extend his will in other avenues as well. The fomor may ignore a single "1" on any dice roll, thereby reducing his chances of botching.

- **Stench of the Convention** — The fomor has cultivated a truly heinous stink, the product of ill hygiene and spiritual poisons. The miasma blinds any who are not used to it, emanating like waves of heat from desert sands off the body of the goblin. Any characters who fail a Stamina + Survival roll (difficulty 7) in the presence of the fomor immediately gag and suffer a +1 difficulty to all physical actions for the remainder of the turn. This penalty is not cumulative, but it must be checked each turn the goblin's funk might afflict the character. A player may spend a Willpower point to allow her character to ignore the stench for one scene.

However the Bane rises to prominence, the result isn't pretty. Part of the transition to goblinism includes a morbid bloating and a cessation of hygiene. Goblinism also drives the victim slowly and irrevocably insane, as the Bane fosters delusions and warps the goblin's perceptions. Many goblins are so far gone as to have no relation to the real world whatsoever. They merrily and maliciously don the garb of creatures from their fantasies, carrying swords and even adopting the personalities of their alternate identities. Before long, young Kevin has completely succumbed to goblinism and become Zuthrax, Harbinger of Oily Pustulence. Goblins sometimes lead short, violent lives from the point of their change, driven into flapping rages by their Banes, whose only satiety is found in inscrutable carnage. Usually, however, they quietly warp those whom they drag into their realms of fantasy.

Black Dog has experimented with video games, under license to Tellus, in hopes of creating what have been preliminarily labeled "cybergoblins." This endeavor has met little success, as cybergoblinism creates such obesity as to render the victims immobile. Still, the attempts continue.

Goblins and the Banes that create them aren't particularly powerful, but they don't need to be. Goblins almost never fight on the front lines of any conflict (though a pack of werewolves tells an apocryphal tale of fighting a goblin horde of SCA members). Instead, goblins nurse quiet hatreds and recruit members through contact with the games. Goblins don't participate in social activities. They tip their servers 5% at best (if at all). They don't help with canned-food drives, pet-adoption campaigns or hospital volunteer efforts — they're too busy playing games.

Latter-stage goblins generally die during messy rampages, when their derangement has festered to such a degree that violence is their only recourse. Goblins at this stage of devolution snap, going berserk at their school or in their offices, and are usually mercifully brought down by police. While few goblins ever deteriorate to this point, some do, and the full extent of their subtle corruption becomes evident in one gross display. The vast majority of goblins never reach this point, atrophying nerdily in anonymity.

The Technique

Making teenagers depressed is like shooting fish in a barrel.

— Bart Simpson

Pentex managers were shocked when they saw how easily and efficiently Black Dog Game Factory did its job. Sure, the numbers were small, but the ratio of productivity to investment was through the roof. And the company was profitable, to boot!

Even though Black Dog voluntarily remains in the hobby game industry, it's not stupid. Indeed, Black Dog analysts and demographers know that it's easier to obtain results from a market that's predisposed to the product it seeks. Selling Bane-infested toilet paper — that's hard. Pandering maudlin angst to alienated weirdoes in various stages of arrested adolescence is a cakewalk. To that end, Black Dog Game Factory uses several techniques to bolster its sales and effectiveness.

Reinforced Stereotypes

Conflict is the crux of a story, and Black Dog foments conflict to add to their players' sense of drama. By encouraging the age-old "us-versus-them" mentality, the Factory ensures that it always has a social element against which its customers can (however vacuously) pretend to rebel. Popular targets include "jocks," "preps" and other "popular" groups, who are supposedly too caught up in themselves to appreciate creativity and individuality.

The truth of the matter, of course, is that there's nothing inherently creative or individual about reading *The Hobbit* 30 times or being able to quote Monty Python on demand. A "jock" is exactly the same as a gamer, except he's a fan of football instead of *Elf Strangler: The Slaughtering*. But, as Black Dog knows, the truth of the matter is secondary to the goal, and it positions itself as the alternative to what everyone else is doing, for which stereotypes are a convenient vehicle.

Sensationalist Radicalism

Genuine social criticism is not only difficult to perform, but often so esoteric that it misses most of the audience. What's easier and more shocking is the blatant (and often pointless) manipulation of low-lives and mores. To that end, Black Dog fills its books with needlessly affected characters and situations. Whorehouses, junkies, priests who keep catamites and other supposedly "taboo" material fills the pages of Black Dog books, mostly to offend parents and peers, but also to provide a convenient hook for censorship cries.

Such sensationalism, existing for its own sake, allows gamers to feel as if they're rebelling against corrupt institutions. Despite the fact that few, if any, of the people who play these games have actually seen a hooker or could identify a pederast priest, it lets them to believe they are getting away with something.

Smug Arrogance

Part of the Black Dog shtick is the modern setting in which they place their games. These are not geeky romps through

The McLaren Formula

The ink and binding additive used in Black Dog books was not actually created by Pentex or a subsidiary, but rather by a deranged print manager in the cold wastes of Canada. Theoretically, the chemical may work in any situation, but the effects are most noticeable (if not numerous) when applied to roleplaying games. The printer has also attained some success by using the chemical in comic books and fringe-interest magazines.

The McLaren formula, named after the creator, does not warp the victim itself. Instead, it acts as a beacon to Banes, who then identify the victim as an easily influenced mark. Over time, the gamer acquiesces to the Bane's suggestions, or simply gives up from the beginning. It is as much the victim's desire to become a goblin as it is the Bane's efforts that result in the change.

The McLaren formula works best on subjects who are "fans" or "fanatics" of their particular interest. This fanaticism creates a weakness in them that Banes readily exploit. *Sure, it's cool to like werewolves*, the Bane whispers in its mark's ear, *but wouldn't it be cooler to be a werewolf?* Of course, the poor kid is never turned into a real werewolf, but by the time he realizes that, he's too far gone to be able to do anything about it.

Arthurian kingdoms or the nerdy travails of some interstellar society, these are gritty tales of the gothic streets, spoken in vernacular and slang and populated by morally ambiguous antiheroes. Fantasy games are for dorks, while the Romantic-Rage setting of the World of Shadow is progressive.

Which is all horseshit, of course. Most of the games played under the Talespinner system have had their plots and characters directly lifted from *Star Trek* and Terry Brooks novels. Substitute black leather jackets for chainmail and TEC-9s for phasers and the transformation is complete. Add to this the perpetuation of hackneyed fantasy tropes brought awkwardly into modern context — pagan religions, cinematic powers and Renaissance Faire clothing — and the Romantic-Rage "innovation" stands as a paper tiger. Nevertheless, it gives the gamers someone to look down upon: those gamers who are still playing in those "less mature" settings.

Cursing and Nudity

Hardly a page of a Black Dog book goes by without at least one expletive, because "that's how real people talk." Yeah, real cretins. Of course, the books aren't simply litanies of execration upon which foul-mouthed suburban white boys can base their in-game Ebonics. Every other illustration — and Black Dog uses many illustrations — depicts some female monster in various stages of undress. For all their claims of bringing maturity to the roleplaying niche, the fiends at the Game Factory don't hesitate to continue the "chainmail bikini" archetype, with the added element of removing the bikini.

Abilities



*I'm going to rip out your fucking guts
And show them to you.*

You and all your kind make me so sick.

— Apocalypse Skullfuck, "Feel My Angst"

Abilities are the Traits used to describe what you know and what you've learned to do. Whereas Attributes represent your raw potential, Abilities represent the way you've learned to use that potential. You may not need anything other than raw Dexterity to dive from a moving car — but if you're trying to grab a loose vine and swing across a ravine you'd better have a command of Athletics. When rolling dice, you'll probably pair an Ability with an appropriate Attribute, in order to properly illustrate the combination of sheer capability and case-sensitive competence necessary to do the job right.

Talents

Talents define the intuitive dispositions of the character — the stuff she can do without instruction, the things she "just knows." The only way to improve Talents is through experience — you can't just watch some Hong Kong action movies and become a Bruce-Lee motherfucker. In a few cases, characters may be able to "observe" a dot's worth of a certain Talent (such as hanging out with some tough gangbangers for a point of Intimidation or figuring out where to cop some dope for a point of Street Cred), but for the most part Talents have to be learned at the school of hard knocks.

Assbeating

Jezebel waved up her finger before the man-child's face.

"Shut up, bitch, or I'll break your goddamn face, yo!" she shouted, and the boy began to cry.

"I'm so sick of you Norms," Jez bellowed, "'cause it's always 'me, me, me' until the shit gets turned around, you know what I'm saying? Well, now the shoe's on the other motherfuckin' foot. My paradigm has become totally shitty and dynamological and it's time you gots to pay!"

Releasing the boiling rage of her outcast soul, Jezebel slammed her fist into the boy's face. She didn't stop until he quit twitching. That would show the Patriarchy...

The Assbeating Talent reflects how hard you are, and how much punk ass you can beat in a situation that demands it. This Talent represents skill in unarmed combat, whether from a life of hard times on the street or from formal martial-arts training. Efficient brawlers are tough, strong, quick and hard-core — they do what needs to be done when an enemy gets in their face.

- Novice: Freakin' wuss.
- Practiced: The football team doesn't mess with you during pass period.
- Competent: You could beat up your old man, that hypocrite.
- Expert: You're probably the toughest Warlock in your Gang.
- Master: You can look at stuff and it dies.

Possessed by: Gangsters, Tough Thugs, Dangerous Guys, Warlocks

Specialties: Beating up bullies, Kicking the crap out of people who picked on you when you were younger, You'll make them pay, Whupping up on the pigs

Game Factory Facilities

Although the game factory has shifted locations twice in the past few years, it is by no means a fly-by-night operation. The first relocation came as a response to a business boom: In order to continue growth and profitability, the company simply needed space to house new employees. Company records indicate that a fatality occurred, but later investigation revealed that it was only an intern. The second relocation resulted from an attack by a pack of Bone Gnawer Monkeywrenchers. The offices left in disarray, Black Dog claimed vandalism, scored an enormous insurance settlement and moved across the street.

The current Black Dog offices are housed in an unassuming business park office building. The building

itself has seen various incarnations of development, all of which mysteriously terminate or suffer occupant defaults. By and large, Black Dog has the latter half of the building to itself, with vacant properties on either side. One of the less human occupants of the Black Dog Office, the Ceiling Thing, makes a rude shanty in one of these disused spaces, littering the floor with piles of offal and the remnants of his meals. The office parking lot has recently had speed bumps installed, as a deterrent to the drunken, lawless rambunctious Game Factory employees inflict on the other business' cars with their own.

The Black Dog office itself is a testament to subtle evil as opposed to the ostentatious, which is embodied more by business rivals Magicians of the Bay. An unthreatening postmodern cubicle farm, the office aes-

thetic is one of ratlike, unchecked "creativity," which means that most of the employees are filthy, indolent slackers who can't be bothered to, like, clean up after themselves, man, because they, like, work better without all these "rules" and stuff. Mysteriously untenanted offices display piles of forgotten paperwork, obsolete computer equipment lies in random heaps and festering piles of garbage "to be recycled" rot in the central forum. Stains from sources unknown mar the carpets and panels of drop-ceiling teeter precariously overhead.

Not every portion of the office is a cesspit of malaise and personal filth, however. Just most of it.

Locations of Note

Black Dog has never been a company to put all its eggs on one basket, and the company's managers are wise enough to spread their nefarious implements of contraband over much square footage, so as to avoid suspicion. After all, a room full of pornography or covered in green slime might be threatening, but a few grams of mildew and a smut mag in one office isn't any big deal.

The Computer Room

A wretched hive of scum and villainy, the computer room is not so much the System Administrator's den so much as it is a graveyard of dead computer parts and technophilia. The Computer Projects manager, Chas McDonald is savvier than his slack-jawed looks suggest, however, and there is method to his madness. Rather than leave the computer department in a sensible order, espionage agents and Monkeywrenchers would have to hack their way through a digital undergrowth of old game CDs, disused application manuals, unlabeled floppies and knee-deep piles of detritus. Any attempt to find digital records kept by the company would either prove frustrating beyond the possibility of completion, or would take long enough to buy the security team enough time to catch wind of what's going on.

For a company so devoted to spreading evil, one anomaly arises in the computer department: Black Dog Game Factory uses Macintosh computers. Freed from the misery and wickedness of PC clones, the company's employees are able to focus on their work rather than being claimed by the endemic creeping vileness of Wintel work environments. Additionally, most Monkeywrenchers and would-be hackers can only throw up their hands in defeat when confronted with Mac platforms. After immersing themselves in the inelegant, Byzantine protocols of the PC world, they can merely gape impotently at the Macs' simple, straightforward OS and hardware. That is, those few who don't make dismissive comments to hide their own inability.

The Conference Room

Dreaded are the business meetings of a creative company, as they wring all inspiration from the hearts of those



whose job it is to crush the spirits of others. Being summoned to the conference room is a dire fate, as it entails minimum hour-long recitations of COGS, autoships, market analysis and doleful assignments.

It is no surprise, then, that an Ennui Epiphling has taken up residence in the Umbral conference room. Fed by the melodramatic displays of malaise that the conference room evokes, this Epiphling has a spoiled, decadent existence, gorged as it is by the constant influx of emotional sustenance. Calling itself the Duke of Woe, the spirit has become trapped in its gilded cage, for existing in the conference room causes ennui in and of itself, but the Duke refuses to leave its precious sustenance.

The Break Room

No portion of the Black Dog office is as fetid as the break room. Although the halls of the Game Factory are not the type of place one would see a rubbery, tentacled monstrosity, that's exactly the sort of thing one expects from the break room. Trash almost always perches precariously in the can, stacked to twice the height of a normal man. The snack machine's repast is so heavily laden with preservatives that it is possible to halt the aging process by simply standing near the thing. Filthy dishes encrusted with primeval substances roil and clash in the sink while the coffee machine brews a noxious, mephitic substance akin to liquid Agent Orange. A Tellus video game, *Brawl Devil Giga*, stands in the break room, spattered with unknown fluids and littered with general filth.

The refrigerator, however, is sparkling clean.

The Processor Room

All of the fluids and chemicals used to mix poisonous elements into the ink are stored in this room, where color separations are printed to film for book covers and the like. Giant bricks of freeze-dried dust labeled *IMAGESETTER FIXER — NOT TO EAT!* lie in stacks against the wall. Only one employee at a time is permitted to know the procedure for using the processor, so if word "just happens" to make it out that subtle contact mutagens adorn the pages of the books, management knows who's responsible. No production department employee who ever knew the secret of the processor and left the company has survived, though most current employees believe they have all moved. In truth, managers set up dummy e-mail accounts and bogus phone numbers for them, so everyone believes that "Robby moved to Chapel Hill" and "Matt's doing graphic design in Savannah."

The toxic processor fluid is only a drop in the bucket, though, as all of the company's full-sized print runs are performed in Canada, where huge vats of similar chemicals are used. Clever or resourceful investigators may be able to find a loose paper trail from the Game Factory to a quiet Montreal suburb... (See p. XX.)

The Make-Ready

Of all the departments at the Game Factory, production has an enviably charmed existence. They get the newest computers, the most reliable software upgrades, the

most space, and windows. Unknown to the casual onlooker, the production make-ready area is also the Game Factory arsenal, should rampaging Garou arrive or a will-subversion experiment go awry. Littering the light tables and supply shelves of the make-ready are numerous subtle implements of death. Any number of X-Acto knives may be found, as can a few dagger-talens disguised as scissors. Cans of spray-mount also function as a pepper spray or crude napalm. Printer toner cartridges containing virulent contact poison are in ready reach of any production employee, and at least two graphic designers' offices contain action figures and other toys with fully functional weapon accessories. If all else fails, any of the burnt-out computer hulks may be hurled as improvised weapons.

The Warehouse

The Black Dog Warehouse is located just a few hundred yards south of the main office, in another building of the same office complex. It seems unremarkable, arranged like any other warehouse of any other business in any other part of the country.

Of course, this is what Warehouse Manager Don Brenham wants you to think.

As the man directly in charge of the warehouse operations, Don runs a tight ship. He brooks no disrespect from his employees and he makes sure everything is completed and shipped on time. If such a statement is not a contradiction, Don is a conscientious Pentex employee — he honestly gives his best to ensure that his job is completed.

The warehouse is a dumping ground for toxic inks, subversive printed matter and "test batches" of various substances that Black Dog brings to its convention events. These chemicals range from contact hallucinogens used at the booth itself to recreational home-brews created by the staff to alcohol-based fomerols that the company mixes into its complimentary drinks when they throw parties.

Additionally, the warehouse is a revenue-generating arm of the company, which would surprise most people familiar with warehouse procedures. In most warehouses, the crew functions as an extension of the sales department, preparing goods to be delivered to distributors and customers. In the Black Dog warehouse, on-the-job injuries and insurance fraud are cottage industries. Don takes care to hire only transients, vagrants and other "forgettable," whom he immediately insures under the corporate policy for hundreds of times their actual value. Once per month, some catastrophic "accident" occurs in the warehouse, and the marketing department covers the matter up while Accounts Receivable quietly processes a fat check.

Some distributors have reported odd miscellany in their shipments from Black Dog Game factory. More than one severed finger has made its way to a distribution hub, and several books have been returned to the warehouse as damaged, spattered as they were with a flaky brown-red substance.

alt.games.blackdog

From: darkphoenix@brainstream.com

To: alt.games.blackdog

Subject: Blood Divers of Terra

man did thi bok suck the big one. It didnt have near enough powers or level rten stuff. I waited long time for this one but the new races arent powerful at all I wantd to have some rules for eating brains and other _kewl_ shit but this book sucked.

Morbius

'I WANT TO FUCK YOU LIKE ANIMAL'

- NIN

From: ecarson@scuzz.berkeley.edu

To: alt.games.blackdog

Subject: RE: Blood Divers of Terra

darkphoenix said:

> man did thi bok suck the big one. It didnt have near enough powers or level
> rten stuff. I waited long time for this one but the new races arent powerful
> at all I wantd to have some rules for eating brains and other _kewl_ shit
> but this book sucked.

Well, you're right about one thing. It sucked royally. Anyone with half a brain in their heads knows that the Blood Divers want to _hide from_ humankind, not destroy it. I mean, look at their allies: the Sons of Science, the Lilith Queens and the Dark Reavers. Now, the Dark Reavers I can understand, but what about those other groups?

This book just goes to show you that no one at Black Dog knows what they're doing. It's usually best just to take the book titles they make up and create your own ideas from there. Everything actually _between_ the covers is crap.

Lates,

Eric

-

"It is a far, far better thing I do..."

- Charles Dickens, _A Tale of Two Cities_

From: jkelly@black-dog.com

To: alt.games.blackdog

Subject: RE: Blood Divers of Terra

Eric Carson said:

> darkphoenix said:

> > man did thi bok suck the big one. It didnt have near enough powers or level
> > rten stuff. I waited long time for this one but the new races arent powerful
> > at all I wantd to have some rules for eating brains and other _kewl_ shit
> > but this book sucked.

Well, damn. Another retarded monkey's all bent out of shape because we didn't list enough crap from the cover of some Slayer album for him to fulfill his slack-jawed fantasies with. Oh, Lord, how could you let me fail so ignominiously?

> Well, you're right about one thing. It sucked royally.

Oh, here we go. Another “_I’m_ the one who knows how this _must_ be” tirade. Yeah, we’re dealing with a fictional property, and there’s only _one_ way this should have sensibly resolved – yours.

- > Anyone with half a
- > brain in their heads knows that the Blood Divers want to _hide from_
- > humankind, not destroy it.

Then I guess I don’t have half a brain in my head. God forbid any of these secret societies actually be something other than _what they seem_. Yeah, Eric, you’re right. Your way is the One True Way. Forgive me, father, for I have sinned.

- > I mean, look at their allies: the Sons of Science,
- > the Lilith Queens and the Dark Reavers. Now, the Dark Reavers I can
- > understand, but what about those other groups?

Oh, yeah, I forgot that every member of every secret supernatural society is a clone of every other member of that society. Silly me. I thought these fucking revenants had individual personalities. I neglected to consult Eric’s Big Chart of How It Should Be for All of You. Can you send me the URL again?

- > This book just goes to show you that no one at Black Dog knows what they’re
- > doing.

That’s how we get our jobs: Gross incompetence and mind-numbing stupidity. I keep telling managers that we need to hire reel reel smrt collig kids, but they never listen to me. You guys are the ones who know how it should have been. And you’re obviously quick to write it down. Oh, but wait, you haven’t actually contributed anything here except your usual snide naysaying. My bad.

- > It’s usually best just to take the book titles they make up and create
- > your own ideas from there. Everything actually _between_ the covers is crap.

Just like everything between your ears or that you offer to USENET.

- > Lates,

Go fuck yourself.

- > Eric

Regards,
Jason

—

[jkelly@black-dog.com]

[Revenant: The Ravishing Developer]

[Black Dog Game Factory]

“You are the last drink I never should have drunk

You are the body hidden in the trunk.”

— Pulp, “Like a Friend”

Black Dog Staff

Jason O’Kelly, Revenant Developer

Drunken, drug-addled, hostile, probably gay and at least well-dressed in those rare times when he bothers to shave or iron his shirt, Jason makes a grand show of hating everything. In truth, he harbors loathing for nothing so much as himself. Jason goes to great lengths to destroy his body in as cinematic a manner as possible, punching holes in various parts of his anatomy, picking bar fights and indulging in substances controlled and otherwise until he

can barely stand, let alone talk the officers out of locking him up for the night again.

None of this is his fault, however, as other forces have conspired to lead him down his miserable path. His work on the **Revenant** game has brought him to the attention of the Atlanta Sabbath, and a lunatic vampire known only as Niña in particular. Jason spends almost every night in some dive bar or another, hoping to catch a glimpse of Niña and convince her to turn him into a vampire.

Niña, of course, will have none of it, and uses her “doting imbecile” to spread information about enemy vampires through Black Dog’s printed material, of which she

sends copies to members of the Inquisition. All the while, Jason continues making books, believing that he's getting away with something by thinly veiling allegories for his own wretched life in *Revenant* titles. Jason truly believes that Niña will one night "bring him under the darkest shroud," and whiles away his time at the bottom of another bottle or cobbling together some half-literate metaphorical tirade about whatever left him in the state of emotional dwarfishness where he currently cringes. If Niña plans on turning him into anything, it's a reddish grease spot when she's through with him.

Evan Stump, Lycanthrope Developer

Although he was raised in the Garou-infested backwaters of Appalachia, Evan has found his niche in the city. Since leaving his bumpkin hills, Evan has ironically trapped himself in the dolor of his own game. Over the course of his tenure at Black Dog, Evan has eroded what little free will he had with his *Lycanthrope* books. Every now and then, a spark of nostalgia washes over Evan's features and his eyes glaze over as he glimpses some fleeting memory of his carefree days before he discovered hobby gaming.

Evan cultivates his rustic demeanor to lead his coworkers into underestimating him. In truth, Evan's a conniver through and through. One of his recent nepotistic coups was marrying his art director, thereby ensuring that he gets the pick of the litter when it comes to artists and graphic designers. The ruse has been successful, for the most part, as no one at the Black Dog office suspects the true depths of his treachery. At department meetings, Evan simply smiles and reclines in his chair, secure in the knowledge that the schedule and printer crises that plague other developers' books will never bother him.

If Evan knew how closely his life emulated the subject matter of his games he would blanch. The Stump family tree can be traced back only 200 or so years, where it fades into nothingness. Further back, and unknown to the modern family, a Black Spiral Dancer Kinfolk family named the Strumpfs fled Shadow Lord persecution in Germany. Packing up their belongings, they undertook a grueling exodus to the young United States, where they promptly vanished — and the Stumps emerged. Evan should have been a full-fledged Black Spiral Dancer at birth, but a rare congenital condition left him with only 22 pairs of chromosomes, and missing the vital gene.

Rick Glumsky, Celtic Filth and Samurai Revenant Developer

No one knows that Rick is dead — himself included. Having worn the developer's hat on more titles than anyone can count and subsequently driving them into the ground or watching them handed off to other developers, Rick's soul became sicker and sicker every day he entered the Black Dog offices. Finally, the weight was too much: Rick's spirit collapsed beneath the tide of exhaustion he brought upon himself.

Now nothing so much as a shambling husk, Rick shrugs off the cold grip of death every afternoon and stumbles into the cubicle where he joylessly grinds out another book. The lamps in Rick's cubicle often stay lit well into the night, which he parlays into statements of how his never-ending toil knows no surcease, even though other developers seem to finish their books with less than 120-hour work weeks.

For one of the walking dead, however, Rick manages to keep perhaps the most contact with the living of any developer. Constant Internet chats, the vagaries of the convention circuit and a masochistic interest in Live-Action games conspire to keep Rick surrounded by an adoring coven of game groupies. Yet the pleasures of living flesh no longer tempt Rick, and he has developed a secret obsession for the editor in the office next to him, about whom he has waking dreams of consuming her brain.

Jeff Henning, Warlock Developer

No one has ever seen Jeff Henning. Although the editors and developers dimly recall speaking with him in a group interview before he was hired, not a one of them can remember his face or describe any of his features. A few other Black Dog employees sometimes associate a hideous pair of workout pants with the mention of Jeff's name. Every day, Jeff's office sits forlorn and forsaken, his monitor left to light the emptiness of its confines.

Despite the fact that he would seem to be mythical, Black Dog is convinced that Jeff does, in fact, exist. Every now and then, a cryptic e-mail surfaces on the company mailing list, claiming that Jeff "was in until five last night," and the *Warlock* books still manage to arrive in the production department's hands (late, but, y'know). Of course, Accounts Payable has noted that all of Jeff's paychecks are cashed in a timely manner.

The truth of the matter is more sinister than it would appear. Almost like a vampire, Jeff preys upon the enthusiasts of Black Dog games. Parlaying his employment with the company into some sort of bizarre social status, Jeff stalks live-action games with the intent of wooing the impressionable gamers therein. Indeed, many find it strange that the small cells of live-action roleplayers seem better able to describe Jeff than his coworkers. They do not find it to be a subject of whimsy, however, as Jeff's paramours always wind up missing for two weeks, after which they fail to have any recollection of meeting him or what went on during their absence. What, exactly, Jeff does with these waifs is anyone's guess, but it's probably something vulgar.

Lucinda Winters, Editrix

Of all the bottom-feeding miscreants employed by Black Dog Game Factory, none is weirder than Lucinda Winters. Normally quiet and reserved, Lucinda becomes a fount of Spenserian strangeness when prodded. Not long ago, in a fandom-infamous "fruitbat" e-mail, some deranged net.fan somehow caught on to the fact that Lucinda was more than she seemed, citing the unmitigated flow of



creativity that could sometimes issue from her. In flapping, purple and vaguely grammatical prose, the fan extolled her virtues — and then disappeared. When asked about the incident, Lucinda simply blushes and smiles and pats her pocket.

Kent Cliffe, Director of Editing & Development

Kent can't be bothered with this bullshit, eh? Where's the beer?

Trevor Chase, Creative Director

When the company needs a new idea to mirthlessly commit to paper, they turn to Trevor Chase, because he's the only person at the company capable of divorcing himself from the litany of bad ideas and worse games that populate the roster of Failed Industry Attempts. An idiosyncratic bundle of weird fetishes and freakish tastes, Trevor nonetheless creates great games, most of which go completely over the heads of the slack-jawed cretins who buy these things. His latest magnum opus, *Deviant*, contained a compelling backstory and a critical look at late-era cultural mores, designed to look into what people would do if they possessed near-divine powers. When the game hit stores, however, it became painfully obvious that people would just put on capes and slug the super-powered shit out of each other, just as they have always done in comic books. After all, why bother thinking about it — that's hard! Let's fight!

Trevor was found dead in his office two weeks ago, the victim of a self-inflicted pistol wound to the head. Blood and brains stained his otherwise pristine "2Hot Nation of Harlem Ghetto Posse Gangsta Experience" T-shirt.

The State of the Industry

Of course, Black Dog Game Factory isn't the only game company out to swipe a soft sawbuck from alienated, delusional geeks. In fact, due to recent shifts in the hobby gaming market, any semiliterate goober with a word processor and a nearby Kinko's can churn out a steaming heap of roleplaying brilliance.

The gaming market is a strange one, however, and no amount of market research can determine what the capricious niche will want as its next "big thing." A recent explosion in collectable cards has turned a garage operation into the industry leader overnight, while a backlash against "corporate gaming" has made darlings out of what would otherwise have been hopelessly overspecialized and utterly unremarkable concepts hastily saddle-stitched and delivered to all four hundred people who are interested in this weird crap.

• Magicians of the Bay

The story of Magicians of the Bay's success is unlikely at best, and cosmically farcical to those who scrutinize it. A former garage company populated by weird creeps too roguish to find other work in "the Industry," Magicians hit paydirt in

The Fallen

In a business predicated upon corruption, vice, debauchery and ineptitude, some turnover is inevitable. Far to the back of the Black Dog office, enshrined within a frame of cracked Plexiglas and stained by unknown humors, lies a forgotten testament to Those Who Have Gone Before. Whether claimed by their own villainy, other employment or the nebulous void into which frenzied minds sometimes fall, the early minds that spun Black Dog into its wretched, fetid state do not go unremembered. As the rude etching on the tiny monument reads, "Gone but not forgotten. Bitch."

André Grünbaum, Former Revenant Developer

André left years ago, leaving behind him a wake of bitter resentment and controversy. Described by nothing so well as a montage of movie quotes — from *Fear and Loathing's* "high-powered mutant... too weird to live" to Doc Holliday's "Poor thing, you were just too high strung" from *Tombstone* — André vanished years ago, only to surface at the helm of a computer-entertainment company. Still as indulgent, greasy and weird as he ever was, he has somehow managed to elude the "retirement" that so often ends a Black Dog employee's tenure. Some say it's because he's clever enough to stay two steps ahead of the unwieldy Pentex organization. Others attribute less savory methods. But who can tell? When he is asked about the matter, André's lips remains sealed — by a thick, sticky mucus.

Will Ridges, Former Lycanthrope Developer

As rumor has it, Will joined forces with the morally dubious Grünbaum after he himself escaped the nefarious

clutches of Black Dog. A quick survey of their offices or the convention circuit would seem to corroborate this, but the truth of the matter is grim. Black Dog has surreptitiously replaced Will (and his inexplicable doppelganger Jim) with fomori, whose purpose is to spy upon the doings of Grünbaum's rogue company. The real Will Ridges is long dead, driven to madness and suicide years ago as a result of fourth-stage syphilis.

Jules Brucattio, Former Warlock Developer

Forsooth and hey, nonny nonny! Goddess bless the pagan ways of Her True Children; pox and plague take the vulgar Ways of technophilia and the blackest Infernal!! Aye, my Celtic Fae and Prodigal concubines. Follow me into the dream-Realms, where we shall dance sky-clad into the Dark Heart-Loins of the Earth-Mother and rut like graceful deer in Heat. Lo, the Blood-Kiss of the Old Witch Ways drives women to wantons and men to zealotry. And life is the hot, cold bullet fired from the pestilential gun-groin of Paradigmal Reality, crushed beneath the doleful Consensual Sleep-Mass-Hive-Mind. Though this be madness, there is much method in it! Don't fear the reaper — Satan, laughing, spreads his wings while running for cover in the temple of love. The Winding Path Is Most Dreadfully Hidden By The Dreams Of Tyrannical Men! Awaken! Awaken, my nubile lovers! Awaken!

Jules is out of his mind and has been committed to the North Georgia Annex of the Valkenburg Foundation. To let him free would be an error of Koreshian proportion.

1993 with their game *Buy More Sorcery*. By capitalizing on the fundamental stupidity of the people who think dwarves and fireballs are cool, Magicians made themselves multimillionaires overnight. Their game, designed along the same financially rapine modularity lines as personal computers, veritably forces players to buy more and more of the game's supplements. A Sorcery fan cannot remain "competitive" unless she purchases thousands of dollars worth of game cards, which, ingeniously, become obsolete once the next set of cards hits stores. This drives fans to purchase more cards... and the vicious cycle continues.

The success of Magicians (or MotB, as they are acronymed), has not coincided with any grace on the part of the company, however, and they comport themselves with all the dignity of rural rednecks who have just won the lottery. MotB has purchased extravagant, baroque and needlessly gaudy booth displays for their convention appearances, and the company hurls money about in a desperate attempt to buy the credibility that other companies have "paid their dues" and earned. In truth, MotB has also earned its success, having once published the sort of hopelessly and unsellably niche-

market books that Industry pundits immediately label as brilliant, but of course, no one sees them that way anymore, because they've "sold out," which means "become profitable."

• LSD, Inc.

The grand-daddy of roleplaying game companies, LSD, Inc. grew from a collective of bloated wargamers whose stunted emotional maturity demanded more attention than anonymous success on the tabletop battlefield. In and uncharacteristically-creative-for-this Industry (which survives by rehashing the same tropes with different cover art every year) burst of insight, two of the wargamers created a rule system that allowed the portrayal of individual characters. They couldn't think of a setting to accompany the rules, though, so they cribbed it all from *The Hobbit* and Arthurian legend.

Nevertheless, the idea caught on and even now, 20-plus years after its inception, *Labyrinths & Lamiae* enjoys the most name recognition of any game published by the Industry. The profitable mixture of innovation and plagiarism didn't save the company, however. Mind-numbingly dim business practices drove the company into millions of dol-

lars' worth of debt, from which they were saved by selling themselves to Magicians of the Bay.

The unification of MotB/LSD has many smaller publishers up in arms and concerned over the possibility of exclusive distributorships. Quite simply, MotB/LSD has the hack-fantasy market cornered, which dominates 65 percent of the larger Industry market. Despite the fact that free-market capitalism allows smaller publishers to print their anemic third-generation rip-offs of other games and pop-culture properties thinly disguised as new games, "it's just not fair!" that MotB/LSD has been successful. Bad blood abounds between these companies and most others, but that's true in all cases where shrill, resentful losers ply their trade.

• Stan Paxton Games

Despite having a mechanically sound game system that accurately simulates everything from starship combat to third-declension Latin-noun derivation research, Stan Paxton Games has yet to enjoy large-scale success. Their games are solid if uninspired and what they lack in spirit they more than make up for in charts and sidebars. The company recently flirted with modern settings and morally gray material with their game **Holy Damnation**, but the lack of anyone who had ever been to a nightclub, been intimate with another person or done an illicit drug hamstrung their efforts to accurately convey subject matter of that nature. Still, Stan Paxton Games has been in the business longer than almost any other company. Perennial sellers such as **CRUNCH** (Characters Roleplayed Under Numerous Cross-referenced Headers) keep the company afloat, which allows them the luxury of pursuing other, less-lucrative titles that they also enjoy.

• Cryptograph

The card-game designers at Cryptograph specialize in taking successful mass-market science fiction licenses and converting them into hopelessly dull exercises in mathematics. Without photographs of amusing 'bot DMX-1138 or the bald-but-dashing Commander Drakkar, Cryptograph's games would essentially be flash cards, but no one has noticed yet.

• Apex Amusement Association

Many industry pundits attribute the boom in niche games to the initial success of AAA's **Undead Cowboy** title, which paved the way for other odd-but-compelling titles. Never a company to rest on its laurels, AAA supported their games from their auspicious launch, earning a Game Designer's Group award and taking the market by storm. Their recent releases, **Undead Cowboy Train Duel**, **Radioactive Cowboy** and the eagerly anticipated **Superhero Radicals** have garnered much interest from an otherwise "we-know-what-we-like-and-we-don't-like-this" self-righteous gamer intelligentsia, and Apex is widely perceived as an up-and-comer. Apparently, spotty editing and uneven art are acceptable, provided the company is small enough that one can appear "eccentric" for liking them.

• Discordium

A loose confederation of weed-addled post-hippie slackers, Discordium puts out surprisingly high-quality roleplaying games based on the horror fiction of Edgar Allen Poe. Although these games are completely inaccessible to anyone remotely connected to normalcy, Discordium's titles are almost universally regarded as classics of the field, and are lauded by old-schoolers and young turks alike.

• The Game Designer's Group

This collective of "creative" minds is not a company of itself, but rather a loose association of Industry employees from any number of game publishers. What exact purpose the group serves is unclear, even to members of the group itself, but dues are approximately \$80 per year. Once every spring the GDG hosts a show (named "GDG") at a randomly selected and foolishly ratified location, generally in one of the far corners of the United States. For three solid days, Industry-related individuals get together, swap stories, pat each other on the back, grovel for work and bore retailers to tears with doleful sales pitches concerning their newest games. At the end of the three-day convocation, retailers promptly forget what they were told and return to their stools in their stores, while company representatives scramble for receipts to justify the expenses they accumulated.

Using Black Dog Game Factory

Believe it or not, you can actually use Black Dog Game Factory in your **Werewolf** chronicle.

In-jokes aside, Black Dog is actually a very subtle, viable foe usable as a red herring or as a clue to some larger scheme. The company is also as functional as any other branch of Pentex. Additionally, the company's use goes beyond that of being an outright adversary: One may learn secrets from their books or employees....

As an Opponent

Of course, the easiest way to involve Black Dog is as many Pentex subsidiaries come into play — as outright opposition. While this won't work well for particularly powerful packs or for a bunch of gumbies who want to kill really powerful stuff to prove their virility, it can prove useful for more intellectual or less violent stories.

Beavis-Style Carnage

If you *really* wanted to, you could just turn loose your players' pack of Garou and let them wreck the damn place. There's no way we... er, they could stand up to the concentrated might of Gaia's warrior race. The deadliest opposition a rowdy pack might face would be a security team, or maybe one of the on-the-take police who sometimes "patrol" the neighborhood when they want to nap during their shift. Should they find the Ceiling Thing in its lair, a savvy pack should have no difficulty dispatching it (it used to be a graphic designer and you know how weak those are). The

mindless violence tack also works as a lark, or when you want to smash a developer in effigy for "screwing up" a book you had been looking forward to. Try it; it's fun.

Smoke and Mirrors

Black Dog makes a good red herring. The spiritual rot contained within their books is subtle yet palpable, and good for creating a sense of creeping dread in players whose characters expect Big, Bad Nasties to be behind every one of the world's evils. The Ceiling Thing scampers away when one looks for whatever caused "that noise over there." The computer files are encoded — who knows what kinds of data Black Dog is compiling? The warehouse — what's in there, exactly? Perhaps one of the characters' relatives or contacts becomes involved with a Talespinning Cabal and needs to be rescued... or destroyed.

This sort of game works perfectly well in a bait-and-switch situation, as well. As basically normal humans, or just a bit more (or less...), the employees of Black Dog can't physically provide any real opposition to the powerful Garou (except maybe the president, who is a kung-fu master and Iliad fomer) — they're merely the Great Oz, the man behind the curtain. Remember, though, that mighty Oz had the entire kingdom buffaloed — werewolves may be surprised at how weak the opposition seems and expect a fierce opponent for the climactic fight, which... never... arrives.... Where is the mastermind lurking? From the outside, Black Dog seems like a faceless, profit-mongering monolith. From the inside, it's really a bunch of fractious, profit-mongering dweebs.

Behind the Scenes

This is perhaps the best context in which Black Dog might come into play. Rather than fighting overtly, the Game Factory prefers to move quietly, spreading a veneer of corruption and decay in its wake. Black Dog doesn't kick in your door and burn down your house, it incites others to do that for them. And even those cases are observed in the breach rather than the rule — Black Dog would rather no one cared than send the world on a rampage. Vice thrives under the apathy of others.

Publications

For the rankest novice, Black Dog Game Factory books may actually impart a minute degree of occult knowledge.

While the majority of the material in Black Dog books is either proprietary, poorly researched or outright fabricated, a small degree is actually based upon occult truths prevalent in the World of Darkness. Players whose characters have been led to perceive Black Dog as either a threatening juggernaut or a circus of buffoons may be surprised at this. The books may even be likened to the journals of Lovecraftian scholars, after a fashion: the dutiful scribbles of secrets beyond the ken of their observers.

Surely, no one is going to be learning Rank Six (or even Rank One...) Gifts or rites from game books, but the loose collection of folk wisdom and miraculously correct speculation may impart a dot of Occult to a dedicated reader.

Subtle hints and clues may also be found in the pages of Black Dog titles. This, however, is a matter largely left to Storyteller discretion. Has Evan Stump unknowingly printed the location of a Black Spiral Hive in *Rampage Through Raleigh-Durham*? Did Niña trick Jason O'Kelly into revealing the location of a powerful vampire's haven in *Bitch-Ass Secrets of Gangsta Dracula*? Do Rick Glumsky's notes contain formulae for invoking boons from the spirits of the dead? All of these and then some may work as story hooks for Storytellers who wish to introduce secrets through curious methods. Who would have thought that escapist game supplements could contain the keys to persistent mysteries?

This also leads to another level of intrigue. The developers and publishers are themselves largely ignorant of the supernatural. They don't believe in monsters — how fanboy! (Well, Jason does, but he's not right upstairs. And he doesn't tell anyone for fear of looking like a total geek.) Even the company's management is largely ignorant of their motives, if not their methods. The word "Wyrn" has never been uttered in the Black Dog offices, as no one except the president and the two estranged owners are even aware of such things. Likewise, Pentex logos appear only on the company's paycheck stubs. Rather, the Game Factory hacks are so convinced of their own hipness and wit that they carry on as if they're getting away with the grandest of ruses. This doesn't make them any less despicable — arguably it makes them more so, as their petty charade is guided by a force much more malevolent than a bunch of drunk *Labyrinths & Lamiae* fans. Who really pulls the company's strings? And how do they manage to get things right every once in a while, if they're "just making it up"? These are questions for your players to answer — perhaps even correctly.







SUBSIDIARIES: A GUIDE TO

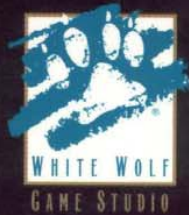
PENTEX™

Brand-Name Corruption

We've got what you need! We make products that make your life a little easier! We can make you happy! We're the big businesses of Pentex — dedicated to bringing you, the consumer, exactly what you want! Eat our food, drink our booze, take our pills and play our games — it's all perfectly good for you. Hey, would we lie?

Big Business at its Worst

Storytellers looking to provide further depth to the corporate villains of the World of Darkness, this is your book! **Subsidiaries: A Guide to Pentex** details the structure, products, mission statements and innermost goings-on of six of Pentex's nastiest subdivisions. Whether you like your Wyrmtainted corporate antagonists awesomely powerful and influential like Magadon or Endron, or nasty in a somewhat subtler fashion like King Distilleries, Avalon Toys and Tellus Electronics, we've got what you need. Worst of all — dare you visit the dark side of roleplaying in Black Dog Game Studio? It might be more than you can handle....



GAMES FOR MATURE MINDS

ISBN 1-56504-358-8
WW3211 \$17.95 US



9 781565 043589

51795